Opus Dei

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Opus Dei

by LiaS0

Summary

Will Graham had never meant for so much death. After being released from the BSHCI for crimes of murder that he most certainly hadn't committed, he knows the right thing to do is move on with his life and begin a new chapter as an innocent man. Take the Chesapeake Ripper's bizarre favor and run. Go to college. Meet the girl. Fall in love. Put his past behind him.

Only problem is, he's gained some fans since being locked up, and fans like the Great Red Dragon don't like to kiss and tell. Fans like the Great Red Dragon like to devour, bones and all. The Chesapeake Ripper may be at the top of Will's hit list, but it may take his cooperation to survive long enough to kill him in the end.

And Hannibal? Hannibal's ready to see just how far Will is willing to go to see his reckoning through.

In the end, the fire could take them all.

You don't need to have read the first fic to follow the second. Thriller, romance, angst, murder, mayhem, gaslighting, slow(ish) burn, old(er) Hannibal, whole-heartedly grumpy college-aged Will Graham.

Notes

Sequel to Magnum Opus, although you do not have to have read the first to understand or follow the second. :) Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Enter Stage Right

Act I: A Part in Which the Hero Meets His Arch-Nemesis

Chapter 1: Enter Stage Right

The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane specialized in two things; first, they provided a safe space for the criminally insane to receive aid, and second, they took perfectly sane individuals and found delicately devious ways to make them certifiably mad. Within the dreary brick and concrete blended walls of only a lower-income-modest budget, there were certain rooms that aspired for civility with their floral wallpaper and gauche leather sofas, but even the hired help could barely boast the environment in which they toiled away at. The mental instability was an airborne virus, one that preyed on the strong of mind and completely obliterated the weak.

Will Graham was neither of these things –the criminally insane, nor the perfectly sane. Rather, he was a curious mix of both, and currently to date he would actually call it more of a curse.

He currently sat in the only room not bugged by the warden's microphones, staring at the hands of a gristly, aged FBI agent. There was no polite ceremony to his visit. They knew each other well enough that pleasantries died when Jack Crawford first accused him of a murder that Will most certainly had not committed –several, in fact.

"Are you listening?"

"Vaguely," said Will. A lie, but he'd become pretty good at those.

"Vaguely," Jack repeated, awed. Before Will could tack something on, he tossed the file down for Will to see. "Read for yourself, then."

Will glanced down nonchalantly. "I see what it says. I guess I'm just processing what it means for me exactly, is all."

"What it means?"

"I mean, it says here the Chesapeake Ripper's been at large for the last four years. Says here he's actually been killing for awhile before that." Will pushed the file folder back to Jack and crossed his arms.

"Yeah."

"Says there's evidence showing there was no copycat to Garrett Jacob Hobbs, just the Chesapeake Ripper."

Jack gestured and nodded. "So?"

“So?”

“I’m saying you’re innocent, Will.”

Will smiled. “Shit, Jack, but I already knew that."

“We made a mistake,” Jack replied, and it was obvious in the lines of his face that he’d been forced to eat crow. A whole lot of it. “One that the FBI does not take lightly. We contacted your lawyer, and a negotiation of wrongful imprisonment reimbursement was reached.” He slid a crisp, bland check over to him, scritching along the file folder. Will scratched the whiskers on his cheek thoughtfully.

His lawyer had called the night before, so he'd had time to mull it over. He lets it sit in a puddle of discontent on the table. “Two hundred thousand is pretty high dollar,” he finally said thoughtfully.

“Considering the specifics of the situation—"

“—My sickness the perfect excuse to not participate in any real detective work—"

“—it wasn’t difficult to convince us to offer the maximum amount,” Jack finished.

Will looked to his eyes, then to his mouth. “Is it that difficult for you to realize you should have listened to me?” he asked.

“Is it still that difficult for you to look people in the eye?” Jack retorted.

Will forced himself to look into his eyes. “I already know what I’ll see when I look into your eyes, Jack,” he said, “I'm sick of looking in eyes like that.”

“The evidence—"

“Was gift wrapped with a neat bow on top for you to keep as a souvenir,” Will cut him off. “So easy that you didn’t think to question whether or not it was really that simple to catch someone supposedly so smart you’d recruited an eighteen-year-old to tag along to horrific crime scenes. Easy as pie.” He folded his arms and dragged his thumb over his bottom lip, thinking. Temper, temper. Try again. Finally, “I’ll take your money. Four years in this place will ensure that I take anything I can from you.”

Jack’s lips puckered, but the papers were produced. Will took the stack and signed each specified place, gaze occasionally cutting to the check that rested at his elbow. Two-hundred thousand was indeed the highest he’d ever heard of, the closest being Inmate 2361-B who’d been imprisoned for allegedly killing his brothers. Three years got him one-hundred thousand dollars, but it also got him a bullet to the head a week after his release when he couldn’t adjust to civilian life and decided that eating a gun was better.

Paperwork done, Jack placed everything in a neat stack and seemed to hesitate. Will studied the clock overhead. 2:13 P.M.

“This killer that framed you—"

“Not interested.”

“He’s killed at least fifteen people, and we could really use your insight.”

“I don’t care,” Will snapped. “You know who I said did this to me.”

“Not that tired old drum about Hannibal-”

“Where you’re not inclined to hear me out, I’m not inclined to give a singular shit about your inability to catch a serial killer.”

“We did investigate him, Will! We found nothing!”

“Only because he’s smarter than you.”

They glared at one another from across the table, and Jack nodded reluctantly. “This killer is, yes. I need you to at least look.”

“I don’t care about your problems.” A beat. “And I don’t want to look.”

“No, but the Will Graham I know wouldn’t want to see so many people get hurt, even if it meant that you got to see me flounder in the process,” Jack said.

Will rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, and he sighed. “The Will Graham you claimed to know was, in your eyes, a psychotic killer,” he said conversationally.

“At the very least, help me because you could become a target if he wants to go after you again,” Jack prodded, not rising to the bait.

“My struggles are old and overused to him. I’ve become a boring study as of late, so it furthers him nothing to continue to try and ruin my life,” said Will with a non-committed shrug. “That’s the only thing you’ll get from me. Free advice, too: you’re no match for him, Jack. Let someone else take the case while I get back to my life.”

“Your life’s not—"

“FOUR years, Jack,” Will snarled, and something in his tone startled Jack enough that he didn’t interrupt. “Don’t you dare try to soften that.” He paused, waited long enough to get control of his voice. Temper, temper. “I don’t…I don’t want to help you.”

“It’s not about me, it’s about the innocent people,” Jack argued.

“At this point, I don’t care about them, either,” Will lied. It was a good lie, though, the kind that slid smooth off of the tongue like oil. “When can I leave?”

“Today,” Jack said, and he looked to the small window in the corner, just big enough to be legal. “They’re already processing your things for release. I took it on a hunch you'd say yes.”

Will heard the lock in the door turning, and he stood, studying Jack out of the corner of his eye. It was something he'd had to learn to do, and he'd become as good at that as he has at lying. "If you're trying to imagine four years here, Jack, I'd not recommend it."

"Oh?" Jack turned, likely ready for another fight.

Will stepped out when the door opened for him, and he smiled grimly. "You're an FBI agent. They'd have slit your throat a week in."

When Will returned to his cell, he found his things –what little he had in his cell that could be claimed as his –put neatly into a small vinyl duffle bag, the hospital's logo emblazoned on the side. Clearly this was something that'd been in the works long before he'd ever been consulted.

He wasn't handcuffed, and he walked down the endless grey walls without the metal biting his wrists for the first time in his entire life. The guard that walked beside him wasn't friendly, but he made no move to stop Will when his pace quickened. He swore he heard whispers, hisses, other inmates calling out, and it nipped at his heels, threatening to trip him until at last the thick, barred doors shut with a definitive THUD.

A familiar face met him at the small space between worlds, where the check-in blocked both the entry to the institute and the exit to the real world. He'd been allowed to change out of the jumpsuit, a simple pair of sweatpants and a plain white t-shirt his only other clothing, and he was relieved when she threw her arms around him that they'd been recently laundered. He dropped his duffle bag to hug her back, only a beat too late. It'd been a long time since he'd been embraced like that.

"Look at you," Alana breathed, letting go of him. Four years hadn't changed her, although it could be said that was because Will had witnessed those four years. Her raven hair was still swept back in loose waves, and her blue eyes still froze whatever they set their gaze on. She smiled, and he felt his own lips twitch in response, a tingling sensation rippling over his skin.

"Look at you," he replied. He tugged loosely on his shirt, and he grinned. "They said that I could keep one item as a souvenir."

"A good choice, Mr. Graham," Alana stated, studying it. "I'd have done the same."

"Are you off so soon, Mr. Graham? I'd have thought you wanted an exit interview."

Will couldn't help the small, tense knot of unease. "I don't," he said, curt.

Frederick Chilton laughed as he reached them, although it wasn't quite humorous enough to be real. "I found the timing of your release interesting," he said, gesturing to Alana. "I must admit, I was a little upset that I only found out ten minutes before you did that it would be occurring."

"I think you know me well enough to know that nothing that happens is coincidence," Will replied. Frederick opened his mouth to reply, but at the expression on Will's face, it snapped shut.

“Congratulations on your promotion, Frederick,” Alana said from around Will. She moved around him to shake Chilton’s hand, and her offer was returned after a beat.

“It was a surprise to me, truly,” Chilton said with faux-modesty.

“The last Head Administrator was lobotomized,” Will informed Alana. “No one wanted the job after that. He was the only one with credentials that applied.”

“Yes, well, I met all of the criteria, and they were more than happy to offer the position to me. If you’re looking, Bloom, I can set you up with a wonderful residency here,” Chilton offered coyly.

“I have a good residency, but thank you,” Alana said with an amiable laugh. “Will, should we go?”

“Oh, yes, you should,” Chilton stated, laughing at a joke only he knew. “Whoever the killer is that framed you, you must find yourself inherently indebted to him for deciding to let you go free.”

“Goodbye, Frederick,” Alana said curtly, and she led Will towards the exit before he could reply with something nasty.

It was spring in the real world, sunlight rippling through maple leaves, and when Will’s shoes touched the concrete outside, he stopped at the steps and stared, eyes hungrily consuming everything in sight. Baltimore, Maryland wasn’t exactly home, but the trees were green, the flowers bloomed, and the air positively reeked with growth and birth and all those happy, renewing things. He inhaled deeply, savoring it.

“What do you think?” Alana asked.

"I'm hungry," he said, taking a step. No guard burst through the doors to detain him. No orderly found just the right spot to sink a needle and send him into a dizzying sleep. He hurried down the steps, pace quickening.

“What are you feeling?”

“Burgers,” he replied. Then, dryly, "glad to see the car hasn't changed."

"Hey, student loans before cars," she laughed, and they climbed in.

His bank assured him that four years had grown his account by exactly a penny and a half. Not surprising. Will drummed his fingers on his leg and was quick to leave after the check cleared, mingling by the mildly spindly maples struggling to grow in the indirect sunlight. Sunlight by the trees felt nice.

“Whoa,” Alana laughed, following him out, “no need to rush. They aren’t going to take it back, Will, I promise.”

“Right,” he said, and it took him a second to really register what she was saying. He laughed, a curt sort of noise that startled a woman walking by. “…Right.”

He waited outside of the burger place, loitering beside a table with an umbrella, and when Alana walked out he sat himself down with his back to the building, watching everyone on the street. His gaze flicked from teen to child to angry, middle-aged man, fingers plucking at his steak fries. He was hungry, but there was a different sort of hunger that took precedent, the kind that made him note hand gestures and tone, smiles that were quick and lingered. The only people he'd been able to observe for the past while had been guards, orderlies, and inmates, and those were the worst sort of people to see in a miserable, dreary, everyday setting. Miss Avery would have cautioned him that those were not the people one wanted to imitate and reflect.

"How are you processing everything?" Alana asked as she added ketchup to the burger. Will grabbed a fry and stuffed the entire thing into his mouth, sitting up to get his burger unwrapped.

"It's very real," he said, hands grazing over a bun that didn't feel like it'd been baked at twelve thousand degrees before being dropped on something cold and left. "But it very well could be a dream. I could still wake up on that cot tomorrow."

"It's not a dream," Alana assured him. "I was there when Agent Crawford met with the lawyer, and we discussed a few things before it was approved and he went to meet with you."

"Jack didn't know I already knew." Will grinned. He'd enjoyed watching Jack dish out what he already knew was coming.

"I told him no matter what he did he was to get you out as soon as possible," said Alana.

"That's a relief," Will said. "I don't think I'd manage another round." And that was a lie, but it was the kind she'd allow him to have. If there was one thing Will had learned about himself, it was that no matter what seemed to happen to him, he woke up the next day –not necessarily stronger, but angrier. More resilient.

He took a bite of the burger, and yes; just what he thought. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. He chewed slowly and swallowed, savoring every moment.

"Do you have plans?" she asked.

"Get my phone turned on, call my dad, get my things, get a car, get a place, get a job." Will ticked off the items on his fingers, grabbing another fry.

"Does…Hannibal fall into your plans?"

Will made a face. "Why would he?"

"Jack tells me you're still convinced he framed you for everything," she said tentatively.

"Yeah, but I don't know what Jack's playing at either, telling you that. He says a lot," Will replied with a shrug.

"You think Jack is...playing with you?"

“This whole thing could be Jack’s idea. He could try and use you to convince me to help him suss out his killer.” Will shrugged, taking another large bite, uncaring of the use of too much mustard and not enough tomato. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d even had a tomato, let alone a meal that hadn’t come pre-packaged.

On second thought, he could remember, and he didn’t want to.

“You think so?”

Will finally braved a glance to her face, and the tone matched the facial expression. Her displeasure and disbelief were matched only by her reluctance to intentionally hurt him.

“No. I think Hannibal finally got bored with me, and sooner or later he was going to have to take credit for his work.” A beat as Will mulled something over. “Is that what they call him since they refuse to use his real name? Chesapeake Ripper?” He glanced over to a mild argument a couple was having at the farthest table, partially to note how she flipped her hair when she was indignant, and partially to avoid Alana’s disapproving expression.

“Leave it to you to still accuse the only man that stood by your side during the trial and believed your innocence,” she replied dryly.

“I don’t think any of you understand just how much he enjoys toying around with people,” Will said with pseudo-pleasantness. He took another bite, looking away from the couple to study Alana’s hands. They’d forgone handling her food in order to maintain business.

“He was trying to help you, Will.”

“He wanted his thesis to be new, bold, and innovative, and if he got to crawl into the head of some messed up kid that was too stupid to realize he was being manipulated, then so much the better,” Will snapped. “Which, by the way, I read his thesis; Dr. Chilton ensured I had access to see just how much Hannibal profited off of everything that happened to me.”

“Then you’ll have also read that he urges others to look for the necessary signs in order to prevent what happened to you to happen to anyone else,” she retorted.

“Yes, if the great Hannibal Lecter can’t cure the encephalitis, no one else should try,” Will said sarcastically. “I got to read a lot about psychology in the hospital, since everyone at first was convinced that I was an intelligent psychopath. He uses forms of coercion and persuasion to get what he wants, all the while his hands stay clean.”

“You’re not an intelligent psychopath,” Alana said pointedly. “Your presence here should show you that none of us think that.”

“The evidence shows me the Chesapeake Ripper finally decided that he wasn’t having fun anymore, so he needed to change things up a bit. Now he gets to take credit for his work, and judging by the desperation in Jack Crawford’s tone, I can assume he can continue toying with Jack a bit more. If he’s going to Hannibal to ask for help next, the Chesapeake Ripper won’t have to go far to get his kicks –the FBI will take the fun right to him.”

“He still asks about you, Will. Even after everything you’ve said, he still worries about-”

“My well-being, and do I eat, sleep, bathe, shave, read, and just generally take care of myself because sometimes at night he wakes up with such paternal thoughts in his head he can’t help by drop by the next day to make sure everything’s alright,” Will interrupted.

“Then why-”

“Because I know him better than any of you, and I see exactly what lies behind that artfully constructed veneer of calm, collected concern,” he replied. “And let me be honest, Alana, behind that careful construction is an intelligent psychopath that took away some of the few people in my life that I care about, and when I was able to piece it all together, he framed me for it.”

“He hasn’t taken me,” Alana observed, tilting her head. In that moment, he saw her as more of his therapist than his friend. “In your skewed perception of him, why is that?”

“You’re useful,” he said, swallowing with difficulty. “And you’re better off blind to him than dead.”

She pursed her lips, and maybe it was the way that she bowed to the meal for a moment that gave it away. Halfway through her burger, she set it down. “I’m dating Hannibal, Will,” she admitted at last.

He blinked, stunned. Another bite, then a douse of soda to wash down the bitter taste of disappointment masking fear. “…I see.” He nodded, feigned contemplation. He couldn't quite look past her chin. “And when should I expect the announcement in the mail?”

“Stop,” Alana warned.

Will laughed bitterly, plucking at the bun. “No, no, congratulations,” he praised, waving a hand dismissively. “I mean, really, I’m just…happy for you.”

“No you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” he agreed, and he drummed his fingers on the table, needing to expel the anger that threatened to burst from him. He focused on the feel of the plastic table against the pads of his fingers, ruminating in the silence.

“You have every right to feel upset, given what you think about him,” she offered lightly.

“You’ve put yourself in a very dangerous position,” he finally replied, when he felt that he could control the timbre of his voice, “and it’s frustrating when I’ve warned you for years, and you still somehow thought that the best place to be was right beside a man like that.”

“Hannibal is a good person, Will,” she said, exasperated.

“You know, if you say it with a little more passion, you may just convince me,” he urged. He needed his hands busy; he fiddled with more ketchup for the fries.

The couple at the farther table was beginning to lose their cool, too. The man's voice rose and lowered in cadence, rough and stiff with something like the hard consonants of an insult. The woman's arms were crossed, her posture stiff.

"What are your plans, Will?"

"You already asked me that," he sighed.

"Are you going to hurt Hannibal?" she pressed, and he looked back to her as he realized what she meant.

"Oh…oh, do I have plans for him?" he asked, incredulously. "Are you serious? I want to stay as far away from that man as I possibly can!"

"It's not an unfair question."

"It is when you're being protective of a man capable of cutting the lungs out of someone while they're still using them," he replied sweetly. The more he felt the anger bubbling from the other table, the more he felt an insistent need not to replicate it.

Alana treaded carefully. Maybe she sensed it, too. "I know that in traumatic events, especially when undeserved actions are done against you, it makes sense for people to find ways to blame mentors friends for what happened," Alana said gently. "You went through something horrifying, and you weren't really allowed to properly grieve for your losses because everyone turned against you when it happened. It makes sense to me that you, in a time that was plagued not only by severe and horrifying losses but also a sickness that literally set your brain on fire, would take that burden and sub-consciously place it on Hannibal since he'd been trying to help you for months and was unsuccessful."

By choice.

The man was gesturing with his phone, jabbing for emphasis. The woman was furiously ignoring him, her own soprano cutting into his tirade every so often with something biting but indistinct.

"Is that an apology? You completely believed I killed those people--"

"I never believed you as Will Graham consciously did anything to hurt anyone," she countered. "I have always believed in you. Did I think that it was entirely probable, given the evidence, that the person that manifested as a result of a high-stress situation coupled with a deadly disease had a capacity for violence? Yes."

"Those two people are the same person. One just had better control over our time."

She startled him when she reached forward to grasp his hand just as the man shouted something particularly foul. "I'm sorry for any time that I made you feel like a criminal."

Will swallowed with difficulty, and he looked at their hands. Unlike Jack's, dry and calloused with a life of hard work, Alana's were smooth and unblemished, nails filed professionally and scented with something floral--Fresias? In stark contrast, his looked much closer to Jack's,

and he saw the precise place that one of Charlie's hooks had caught on the back and broke skin. He let go of her hand to snag another fry, nodding curtly.

"If you want to talk about Hannibal-"

"I don't want to talk about Hannibal anymore," Will said curtly. "When I say that I want to remove him completely from every aspect of my life, I mean that. We can talk about what you want to talk about."

"What I want to talk about is what you don't want to talk about," Alana said with a small smile.

"We can talk about whatever it is that I do or don't want to talk about, how's that," Will offered. He glanced at her eyes, then over her head where a man in a greasy t-shirt carried a to-go order in one meaty fist.

"I don't want you to worry about me, Will. I've been taking care of myself for a long, long time."

"People that I care about tend to die. Worry comes with the territory."

"You still have me, your father, and despite what you think, Jack Crawford is very much invested in your well-being."

A rum deal, no matter how you looked at it. The only one he felt especially grateful for was the one sitting just across from him, and she was currently dating the only person in the world he'd gladly murder.

"Just promise me that you'll be careful," he said, looking to his food. The burger had about two bites left, and he wanted to savor them. "I know…I know you believe Hannibal is great, but he's a snake. His venom is slow acting, and…I just want you to be safe. When the time comes-" He sighed, scrambling to find the words-- "when the time comes that you…have the choice to be blind or brave, Alana, please just be blind. I think maybe he'd let you live if you just chose to be blind."

"You weren't blind."

"Oh, I really was, until I wasn't. By the time I saw, though, I wasn't in any position to do anything about it. I think that's one of his favorite parts."

"I'm as safe with Hannibal as I am with you," Alana assured, and Will peeked up at the umbrella again, resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

He could say with utmost confidence he'd never had the inclination to eat someone, but maybe his definition of safety and Alana's were completely different.

Clash Center Stage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2: Clash Center Stage

“I’ve missed our talks.”

Will stared at the ceiling, legs crossed and arms tucked behind his head with a false impression of comfort and ease. He was not comfortable. He was not at ease. Just on the other side of the bars, the devil sat in a chair, too close for orderlies’ comfort and much too close for his comfort. He didn’t voice that, though. Jared sat on the smallest space at the end of the bed, and he swung his legs.

“In truth, every day at four-thirty I open the door to my home expectantly, or I find myself pacing. Dr. Du Maurier tells me that I know precisely where you are, but I seem to be in a position where I refuse to make that my reality.”

There was a leak in one of the pipes at the end of the dreary hall, and it dripped in the silence, a steady beat that timed itself to Will’s heart. He didn’t give any form of acknowledgement, save for the breath he held when he was given the sudden urge to lunge across the cell to see how quickly he could strangle a man.

He dismissed the notion, since the more he lingered on murderous thoughts, the more substantial Garrett Jacob Hobbs seemed to be.

“I have the luxury of trying to refute the fact. Your realities were formed against your will, no matter how ardently you struggled to correct them. Now you are here, and this is your reality.” A beat. "You must hate me."

“Don’t say anything,” Jared Freeman cautioned. He must have known better than Will did about how close he was to screaming. Thankfully, the medicine that’d been politely shoved down his throat kept most of the extreme emotions at bay, tempered with a sweet bliss of chemicals that knew just how to shut a man up.

“Are you so convinced of my guilt that you won't speak at all?” He nodded at Will's silence. “I asked Agent Crawford to investigate me, and he found nothing. I thought it could be some small comfort, but..."

“Steady,” Jared coached.

“You said before your trial that the light of friendship would never reach us. I’m sad to see you hold to such convictions, even now. No matter what happened, you were not in your right mind. Surely that is some comfort to you?”

Down the hall, someone let out a horrendous, terrified scream. Will jolted at the noise, at the suddenness and the terror. Sometimes inmates screamed because they'd had a nightmare, and sometimes they did just for fun. Sometimes, though, an orderly decided they'd had enough, and those screams were the worst sort to hear because no matter how much the inmate begged, no matter how much they prostrated themselves and wept, it changed nothing. Will's heart thudded, and he listened to the cadence of the sound, weighing it in his ear. This was a scream of the last variety. He knew that sooner or later, he'd sound much the same.

"Can you sleep with the noise?" Hannibal wondered, hushed. "What do you dream?"

Will continued to stare at the ceiling, and it wasn't until Hannibal left that he rolled over to stare at the wall, trembling. Jared moved from the bed to the wall, and he tapped fingers along it, searching for a weakness.

"Good job," he coached, and he flickered, wavered. Since the hospital, the presence of his dead classmate had shifted from a solid, physical being to one Will conjured on purpose, one that he shaped into his reality rather than accept it as his reality.

If he was going to kill Hannibal one day, he needed as many psychopaths in his head as he could get.

Will was able to be convinced into a smart phone and tablet bundle rather than the simple flip phone in the corner. It wasn't so much the talents of the salesperson as it was the remnant of a memory, a girl with dark hair and a crooked smile.

Yeah, pretty sure drug dealers use those. They're called burner phones.

Then, clothes and shoes, but Alana was more invested in that than Will was. It was hard to be in stores, hard to have the four walls pressed in with no view of the sky. What day was it? What time? Between the plaid shirt section and the denim, he couldn't have said. When it was time to leave, he tossed the shoes from the prison in the garbage by the exit.

Bill Graham no longer lived in Wolf Trap, Virginia. He was found closer to the docks, nestled in some questionable apartments on an odd side of town. It suited him better, the sagging walls of a building best described as moist. Will stared up at it for longer than necessary before heading up the steps to the address written on soft paper.

There was a rumpled, washed but left to dry appearance about Bill Graham when he first opened the door. The machine oil smell hadn't faded in four years, but there was also an undertone of Lemon Pledge and soap. He'd been cleaning.

"Will," he greeted. His voice was sand on marble, scratching in his throat. "Come in, come in."

Will glanced at Alana before he gave a reassuring nod.

"I'll be in touch," she said on the stairs, just to the side of him. "Okay?"

"Thanks, Alana."

She glanced to the yawning door suspiciously before she headed back to her car.

The apartment reeked of the same Lysol stench, as well as food delivery. He followed his dad down a hall of smudged walls and crooked, haphazard photos of Will's early childhood. The Bill Graham in the wake of his son's alleged murder spree apparently took care of himself, although he managed to attempt at the sentimental.

Winston bounded around a corner when Will reached the front room, and he fell to his knees to catch him, a laugh springing unbidden as the dog tackled him, tail flailing and breath haggard. Will dug his fingers into his fur, and he didn't mind a single ounce of slobber that got on his face or shirt in all of the excitement.

"He's missed you something fierce," Bill said, easing down onto a couch that'd once been loved fiercely by a cat. "Sometimes he gets out and I find him at the old place like he's waiting for you."

"Thank you for watching him," Will said from among the fluff and lolling tongue.

"Weren't no trouble," Bill replied, waving a hand. "He's a good dog." Will opened his mouth to remind his father that the old Bill Graham had never wanted the dog, but he stopped himself. The space between them was tense, roughened by words thought but never said, felt but never revealed. Will studied his father's work boots, then turned and went back to scratching Winston's sides.

"You're a good dog," he informed Winston, and Winston all but crawled onto his lap, tail fwapping against the ground.

"They tried at first to take him back to…to his first family, but they didn't want him. It was their daughter's dog, and…they just couldn't bear to keep him." Will nodded, sliding his fingers along the dark spots of fur on Winston's coat, admiring them. Although the circumstances of him finding Winston were grim –he could only assume Hannibal had let the dog escape after he'd killed Cassie Boyle –he wasn't going to complain. In reality, he was happier to see the dog more than his dad.

"So…you're out now," Bill said awkwardly.

"It turns out that when I said I didn't do it, I was right," Will said archly. The silence between them bubbled, blistered. Will considered popping it with the tip of the knife, but he didn't feel like drawing the pus out long enough to fix it. He cleared his throat.

"I still got your stuff," his father said after a beat. "It's all in the spare room I got, right by the fishing gear."

"Thank you," Will said. "You didn't have to do that."

"Good hell, Will, you're my son."

Will let the silence speak for itself on that matter.

“I...I know I was a bad father…" Bill said, and his tone showed just how much he'd practiced this small speech. "I left you to your own devices, always gone and always doing something else. I was so distant, you just…you almost died, you were kidnapped, you were visiting murder scenes for Christ’s sake, and I didn’t know anything until after your arrest. You...you didn't come to me with all of this.”

“I didn’t want you to know."

“And a better dad would have been the first you told when something went wrong,” his father replied earnestly. “I thought I could fix your problems the way I’ve always fixed mine, then I just went and made everything worse.”

“I appreciate that," Will said because he didn't know what else he should really say. Fingers wound tight into the fur.

“I’ve been seeing a therapist,” Bill revealed. “Work had it set up after...after Charlie was found, and since this place has insurance benefits, I can afford the co-pay. I got to know a lot about myself that I didn’t like to find out.”

“You’re seeing a therapist?” Will asked, stunned.

“I have what she’s tentatively calling an identity disorder that crops up with bouts of extreme stress," Bill Graham announced, and it was said with the practice of someone that'd had to practice saying it a lot. "Dissociative Fugue or something like it. She said I’ve also got low serotonin, making me a bit of a depressed slop,” he added. He looked down at the floor between them. “So I’ve been working at that. Doing some side jobs to afford the medication. Getting out more.”

“That’s…big,” Will managed. He wrapped his arms around Winston.

“I figured I’d done enough to make your life miserable, the least I could do is look someone else in the eye and admit it.”

“Has it helped at all?” Will questioned, glancing up to his shoulder.

“It’s letting me know the me that I am when other people see, and I’m trying to fix that. I figured, I can get you a job at the boatyard, and you can take that spare bedroom, and you and I can-”

“I want my own place,” Will all but interrupted, using the pauses between Bill’s words to cut in. “I want my own job, too. I'm going to go to school.”

Bill’s face wrinkled and caved at that, but he nodded all the same.

“Then…I’ll work on building our relationship another way,” he said heavily. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a sorry excuse for a father, Will.”

Will nodded, but there was nothing for him to really say. He had a father, but he had him long after he’d realized that he could do more than just survive without one. When he stood up, Bill helped him load his meager belongings into his truck that magically turned over.

“I’ve been taking care of it,” Bill said, patting the hood. “Got a new starter and renewed the tags for you.”

“Thank you,” Will said honestly. They shook hands, Bill's trembling ever so slightly.

“Don’t be a stranger, son,” he pleaded, glancing from him to Winston secured in the passenger seat. “I…don’t want to be a stranger to you anymore.”

“Okay.” Will nodded, climbing into the truck.

Finding a place to stay was easy. The woman practically threw the rent offer on the table at him a couple of weeks after his release, and if she recognized his face she said nothing about it. She paced in her living room and bemoaned the last tenants who'd ruined her house for good, emphasizing the father that almost always paid late. When Will signed the papers, she didn’t seem to notice that he held the same last name.

“Then apparently that son of his went and hacked some bodies up, and now--" Too late she realized that a lease done could be undone. She glanced at the paperwork between them, then busied herself with drowning his coffee in creamer. "Now you're going to get settled in nicely, I'd say."

“If you hate it so much, maybe in the future I can look into buying it off of you,” he said, sipping on the creamer with a dash of coffee.

When he pulled into the dirt driveway, he sat in the truck with Winston for a bit, drumming his fingers on the wheel. He’d thought –stupidly –that time had the potential to wash away the taste of pennies in his mouth when he looked at the very place where his world fell apart. Time can't wash away associations, though, and the longer he looked, the easier it was to find each place where he'd stood and had his world loosened out from under him.

There was once a time when he thought it’d begun cracking at the edges when Jared Freeman first pulled a gun from his jacket cavalierly to kill their teacher, but that wasn’t the beginning of any sort of end. No, no, now Will could say that the beginning cracks were when a soft, accented voice first pulled him from his daydreams of being the one to pull the trigger. The beginning was when Hannibal had cornered him in the hall and assured him that no matter the turn of mind, Will would one day find him interesting.

How woeful for Hannibal that Will now found him to be quite interesting indeed.

He walked where he once walked, pressed his heels to the dirt where he recalled fainting under the fever of his mind drowning in a blaze of fire. He looked out to the field, staring at the space where he’d found Nicholas Boyle with his insides out, where Hannibal had once grabbed him and pressed hungry, searching lips to Will's. No, no, he’d said, you certainly killed him.

“In this moment, you are at your most beautiful.”

Winston's whine kept him from brooding. He unlocked the door for them both and walked in, making sure to take his time moving about a house that hadn't changed much since he left it

last. Thankfully the landlady had cleaned since the investigation.

Unpacking next to nothing was easy, and Will slept on the bed in the living room. He couldn't quite bring himself to go into the room he'd once slept in. Too many memories of too many people housed their horrors within those walls, and he slept with his back to the hall. In the dead of the night, he imagined hands reaching, stretching beneath the doorway to claim him.

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Will woke early, and his neck prickled. He couldn't say why he felt the need to tense, but he did, and it was almost like being right back in the cell once again with the light's out; the inmates sometimes screamed in the dark, and it felt like nails were carving curses into your scalp. He blinked, and he stared at the threat of sunrise cutting through the faded, blue curtain.

It wasn't until he actually got up and went to make breakfast a couple of hours later that the feeling returned, a cold dash of adrenaline to the gut, and Jared circled the table, tucking his chin into his palm. *"Well, now."*

A letter lay in the center of the scuffed and beaten table, the same table he'd once eaten his fair share of Hungry Man meals at years before. His name was written with floral elegance, time and attention to the curves of the letters that only a fountain pen could make. It was warm, having acclimated to the inside of the house; it'd been there awhile now.

He picked it up and pried apart the wax seal on the back, anxiety and excitement coiling about his feet. *Be careful*, he'd told Alana, as though he hadn't made his fortress from the bones of a warzone. Be careful because the Chesapeake Ripper likes to play games, and it seemed that he was ready to begin.

Welcome home.

-C.R.

-

Will had lied before--many times, but this was one time in particular that mattered.

He hesitated only briefly, standing outside of the door in the backyard of someone else's house a little less than a day later. Tricky hands picked locks, and he did so with the skill of someone not long-practiced, but one that had spent a long time talking to someone long-practiced. Hands mimicked where they supposed they'd once been told to go.

"*Naughty,"* said Jared beside him, taunting. *"You're being naughty."*

It was imagination now, but once it hadn't been. Once, he'd thought Jared very, very real. He couldn't quite put a finger on why he often still imagined him, but he didn't fight it anymore.

In a way, keeping him within the walls of his mind kept him alive towards the end. In a way, some part of him knew that keeping him around upped his survival rate considerably.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs also lurked, but his special brand of psychosis wasn't quite the everyday sort. He only came out when it was necessary, otherwise; Will kept him buried.

He stepped into the house, cool in the early Spring air that still nipped at night and threatened frost. Behind him, Jared wiped his feet, and Will closed the door carefully, quietly.

"You're going to do this," Jared murmured, and it's unclear if it's an order or a realization.

Will left him in the kitchen and crept farther into the house, drawing the gun that'd sat holstered at the small of his back. It fit in his palm, and there hadn't been a single hesitation in taking it from his father's room before he left.

Bill Graham owed him a lot more than that, and Will would bet his whole new chance at life it wasn't registered. His dad wouldn't dare report a gun he wasn't even supposed to have. He wondered if Bill would even bring it up the next time they ran into one another.

If they ran into one another.

The house was draped in as much finery as the one before. Hannibal seemed to have gained an abundance of art since the last time Will stepped through his halls; he spied Saint Sebastian just across from Zeus conquering another victim.

Gods like to feel powerful.

If he'd worried that walking down this space, surrounded by Hannibal's things, would rattle his resolve, the worry dissolved with each resolute step. This was not the house that haunted his thoughts, imprints of each room rubbed over enough to fade onto the walls of his skull. These walls were foreign, oblong, and thankfully the cracks in the paint didn't house his horrors. He marked them, but he wasn't moved by them.

Hannibal met him at the bottom of the stairs, bat aloft. He must have heard Will walk into the coat rack set by an unfortunate corner, and the sound of his thundering steps filled the otherwise silent house just seconds before he revealed himself. It was a normal reaction to an intruder, and Will met him at the stairwell with the pistol raised and the safety off.

Darkness made a monster of Hannibal, casting violent shadows in the hollows of his cheeks. He turned on the landing of the stairs, flat lips lifted into a snarl, nightrobe garishly clashing with the stair-runner, bat poised for a skull-crushing hit. His teeth still flashed pearly white in the gloom, sharpened incisors meant for tearing flesh.

He had the grace to look utterly surprised for the briefest of moments when he realized just who was breaking into his house in the middle of the night; it was quickly over, and the bat was abandoned as hands were raised in compliant geniality. The expression shuttered, and it was just Will, Hannibal, and the pile of bodies that'd stacked up between them.

Silence sat, limp and crumpled like a fresh corpse. Will added it to the pile, just on top of Abigail Hobbs' accusing eyes. Raging, screaming inside of his head, Jared begged Will to kill just him already.

“Will,” Hannibal greeted finally, voice coarse.

It was hard to see the expression in his eyes in the darkness, but Will felt something hit hard in his gut at the sound. It clenched, and his grip on the pistol clenched with it. Spit rushed to his mouth, and he swallowed painfully, Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Hannibal."

"I didn't believe it for a moment, but it's actually you."

"In the flesh," said Will. "A bat?"

"I've been told it's the best home defense." Silence again, and Will wished he could have seen the clever expression in Hannibal's eyes then, the irony. What were bats to a killer's hands, to the crafting palms so calm as they removed the eyes from a screaming man to punish him?

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your company so early in the morning?" Hannibal asked. "Have you come to kill me?"

"No."

"To intimidate me," he corrected himself.

"Not possible."

He pondered only a moment, then nodded slowly. If he was afraid, it lay hidden in his smooth expression."Ah...to warn me, then."

"I want you to leave me alone. That's all."

"Oh, that's all?" Hannibal's smile may have seemed kinder in the light. It was hard to tell in the gloom, all incisors and shadows. "You come into my home in the middle of the night to tell me to leave you alone?"

"It's a precaution," Will replied easily. "I see you poking at Jack, and I don't want any part of that. Your reasons for letting me go are not important, and I don't want to be involved."

"You think I'm the reason you're free, and yet you don't want to know why?"

"Should I?"

"Most people would wonder."

Will shrugged. "Not relevant."

"Shouldn't it be?"

"Not to someone that wants to live."

"Says the intruder with the gun held at their suspected cannibalistic murderer," Hannibal sneered, and that time he did bare his teeth. "If I am so dangerous as you think, I wonder you daring to break in and threaten me?"

"To tell you I want no part in whatever it is you're doing. You admire boldness, right? You want to keep poking at Jack Crawford, that's your business, but leave me out of it. "

"You think I'm poking at Jack Crawford?"

"I won't help him," Will assured him. "I don't want to be anywhere near your crime scenes, and that leaves you to your bloody mess and me to my life. "

Time had softened Hannibal's accent, but only slightly. Where some parts had clipped and sharply dug at the words before, now they rolled, gentle. "To a normal man, your words sound...delusional, Will. Having just been released from prison, innocent of crimes you didn't commit, I wonder if you've thought about the repercussions for your actions. What would Dr. Chilton say? Agent Crawford?"

Will didn't quite have a response to that. Something about it stopped his mouth, made him hesitate. His arms were starting to get tired.

"I am a psychiatrist now...should I report these delusions to someone, I wonder if they'd place you in a different institution to help with the trauma." It was subtle, the shift in his voice from pleasantly observant to politely cruel. A beat. "Did they take you off of your medication? Are you having trouble adjusting?"

"Right for the throat," Jared crowed beside them. Then, *"shoot him."*

"Leave me alone, Hannibal," Will said, ever the warning but also the bait. His voice shook. "I mean it."

"Welcome home, Will," Hannibal replied, sanguine-sweet.

He left Hannibal on the landing, and he slipped out the way he came. His heart had crept ever higher in his throat the longer they spoke, and it sat heavy on his tongue the whole way home.

"Could have killed him," Jared said. *"Could have killed him and been done already."*

"It has to mean something," Garrett disagreed, and he lingered in the backseat, faded and rotted. *"He has to honor him, otherwise it's murder."*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for the positive response! I'm glad you're ready for the sequel because good lord things are going to get wild. :)

I think there's a certain freedom to them being somewhat younger and therefore not so wise. Will is 22 in this fic, and Hannibal is 28/29. They haven't made the same mistakes yet, and instead are going to be susceptible to making so many fun new ones. Crossing that breach to the intimacy they once had will take time and something much like luck.

Stanislavski Method

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3: Stanislavski Method

Will often found himself down by the small river in the backyard, fishing. In a way it both forced him to face his memories, staggered and hateful as they were, and in a way it allowed him to create new ones by replacing his old footsteps with fresh ones. Isolation in the BSHCI gave him an awful lot of time for thinking, but in this way it somehow was made better by the lack of walls, the constant running water, and the fish.

It was spring, and so there were many. He caught and released, caught and released, and he let his thoughts run with the flow of the river. He'd kept the letter. Signed, C.R. So Hannibal meant to see things through that medium while playing a victim through Alana. He'd expected it, and so it goes. Hannibal meant to make this a game. Will had expected that.

Imprisonment had made him good at those, in some ways. Dr. Chilton wasn't his first warden, after all. He had Hannibal Lecter to thank for that.

The river flowed, and so his thoughts went. It'd been good to see Hannibal first in the shadows this time instead of the light. It made his open threat all the easier to hear: institutionalized somewhere else...

His game would extend only so far as he allowed. He could just as easily try and throw Will into a prettier cell somewhere else and lock away the key.

Still, it was good to see him, get things over with. A punch to the gut, but a necessary one. Hannibal was dating Alana. Another punch, but a manageable one. Will needed a hobby to keep his mind busy, a distraction. Maybe he'd pay and take a class or two for the time that yawned between the baiting and the bite.

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Beverly Katz had always been an interesting person to Will. Someone that seemed to see his quirks and mind them, and she'd taken his alleged murder spree pretty hard.

Determination and grit, he would suppose, explain what drove her. Top of the class at school, all because her fury at what Will did drove her to write a thesis on the matter at GWU, one so thorough that she one day made a startling revelation, one so extraordinary that she fell off of her work stool and hit her tailbone, hard.

Her thesis had taken a turn, all because she'd stumbled upon the one point Will had been trying to make the entire time: He was innocent.

The FBI had fast-tracked her application after that. *Gotcha*, she'd said, sitting down across from Will three years after he'd been imprisoned.

“You look rough, lumberjack,” Beverly said by way of greeting, sitting down across from him. It was a small, nondescript café, and Will took his coffee black, studying her as he lazily stirred his spoon.

“You don't," he replied.

Clever edges just like Alana's tilted, then quirked into a smile. “The academy was good to me,” she boasted. “There's a few things I have to do for my final classes first, but I passed the courses. You’re looking at an official FBI agent.”

“I'll keep my distance. Don't give my regards to your boss," he warned. He didn't want to give them any opportunities.

"The FBI's the best asset you've got."

“Thank you,” he said, and it had nothing to do with assets or bosses.

Beverly sobered somewhat, and she busied herself with her macchiato. Extra caramel. “It wasn’t just me. As much as I hate to say it, that shrimp of yours really knew how to dig places that I couldn’t reach.”

“That’s because Freddie Lounds doesn’t have the same scruples about the law."

“You could say I didn’t, either.”

“Not once did you break the law.”

“Is that an accusation in Freddie Lounds’ corner?”

“More of an observation."

They exchanged smiles, and somehow this was more validating of his freedom than anything else had been. He'd missed Beverly.

“What now, then?” she asked.

“Alana is dating Hannibal.”

She focused on her macchiato rather than try and find the words to convey the bitter silence that stretched between them. Will focused on the steam that rose from his cup and curled into the air. He couldn't help but wonder how many other setbacks he'd stumble across.

"That will make things...difficult," she managed after some thought.

"Complicates things," he agreed.

"Do you think that's on purpose?" she asked.

He'd turned that over for most of the night after Alana had confessed her bleak future with Hannibal Lecter. It'd weighed in his gut, lead that pressed heavier and heavier as late night TV droned in the background.

"I think it's intentional, but there's nothing we can do about that. It doesn't change things, just complicates them."

Beverly snickered, one of the things that hadn't changed since high school. "You're going to lose a friend in all this if you're not careful."

He'd considered that, too. "Probably. Doesn't change anything, either."

"Fair." She scowled. "You think they're banging?"

"Yeah," Jared nodded. *"Like rabbits."*

"Probably." Will shrugged. "More than likely."

"What's that like, I wonder," she said, more to herself than to Will.

He took that small distinction as an opportunity not to answer.

They drank their coffee in silence, Will watching the crowd and taking in the small glimpses of mundane existence. It was much like peeking behind a curtain to something secret, those lives he'd never see again, but there was something in their distracted, busy natures that he longed for. Mundane worries, like broken faucets or a missed deadline at work. Friends not texting back--being the friend that didn't text back. He hadn't really had the chance to do that, live something mundane.

"It's good to see you out of there, Will," Beverly said as they went to part ways.

"Thanks, Bev. It's...going to be good to be out of there."

"Just call when you're ready."

"Will do," Will said, and that was more a truth than what he'd told Bill Graham.

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"I know."

"I mean, I'm just absolutely shocked, Will, shocked!"

"I know."

"Do you realize that he could have called the cops? He could have gotten you arrested and thrown back in jail?"

"Yes," he sighed.

"This was the kind of thing that I was afraid of! When I asked if you had any plans for Hannibal this is what I was referring to!"

"I know, I know."

"He's more concerned for your mental health than anything, but someone else wouldn't have been," Alana railed.

Will took it in stride, seated at the curb just outside of where he had an interview to work in a mechanic shop. A few days of vigorous applications had led him to this place, but it'd also apparently led Hannibal to Alana where he'd made the bold choice to reveal Will's midnight exploits. Will wondered if it was petty revenge or Hannibal's need to revel how easy it was to manipulate her.

"Did it occur to you that I could have been sleeping over?"

"It didn't," he replied honestly.

"What would you have done if I'd come down the stairs?"

Will pondered that for a moment, drumming fingers on the steering wheel. Across the street, two women had a play date for their children set up at a quaint coffee shop. They chatted amiably while the two girls colored at their smaller table.

"I'd have ran," he decided at last.

"Will," she admonished. "What if he'd called Jack?"

"I bet if I flashed something about the Ripper he'd have let me off so long as it didn't also reference Hannibal," he said, quiet.

"Don't give them any other reason to try and control you," she said, and it only faintly echoed Hannibal's threat. *Did they take you off of your medication?*

"What's it do to take anti-psychotics that you don't need?" Jared wondered, pacing just in front of him. *"You as crazy now as they thought you were?"*

"I'm sorry, Alana, I won't do it again," he said, and it sounded damn near sincere. "Just some residual anger, I guess, but I got it out of my system." Seeing Hannibal so ready to unleash his cruel side had helped in some way, bolstered him when he saw him bare his teeth in the dark. It was fitting to first see him cast in shadows this time. The first time they'd met, he'd been sitting underneath the hallway light.

"Really?" she asked dubiously. "Are you going to go and see someone about it at least? Or even just about anything that's happened?"

"I spent the last four year under the scrutiny of doctors digging into my brain like teenagers behind the bleachers at a football game, and you think I'm going to go and pay one to do it?" he laughed, and he chewed at his thumb idly, more to have something to do with his mouth

than cuss. "I'm actually going into a job interview. Like I said, I need to have busy hands. Get a job is on my list."

"Idle hands are the devil's workshop," she said with a sigh. "Good luck, Will."

"Thanks, Alana."

"I think you owe Hannibal an apology."

"I don't, and you can tell him I said that. But also remind him to leave me the hell alone."

"Will-"

"Have a good day, Alana," he urged, and he hung up.

-

A week passed, and he found himself the proud owner of the title Shift Lead at Wilson's Auto Body. It was a crowning achievement that he shared with absolutely no one. It kept his hands busy, and it felt about as honest as he was going to get anytime soon.

When he wasn't working, he mindlessly distracted himself with fixing the house up, doing remedial repairs to damages from the winter. He thought of Nicholas Boyle carved open in the field, kisses stolen in the heat of desperation, and he kept his back to it.

He hadn't had the phone a month before he started rejecting calls from Jack Crawford. Will supposed news traveled fast in the FBI, and if Beverly was going to work closely under him in the BAU, she'd have to share information when requested. Will hadn't let him get more than ten seconds on the line before he'd hung up the first time, and every other call since went to voicemail.

Work was tedious said the assistant manager during the orientation That wasn't the case for Will, hungry as he was to simply do. Four years did something to the mind, made the idea of work even so boring as oil changes and air pressure checks exciting. Eyes burned holes into walls when a mind needed to be busy. Teeth chewed through lips when a mind had nothing to turn to.

His new coworkers complained, but they didn't seem to know just how good they had things, how even a freedom so simple as bitching on the job was just that--freedom given. Money bought clothes, shelter, meals; meals of your choice that tasted much better than the dry part of a sponge. There were other ways of eating three squares that didn't taste so good going down.

The hours after work yawned open. He re-stained chairs at the house and even painted the white rails on either side of the steps leading up to the front door. Will fixed leaks, kinks, faulty valves, and a windows whose latches didn't want to stay. He didn't think to ask the landlord for compensation as he did it. Will considered it an investment for when he finally tried to buy the thing off of her. He needed to stay busy, and the house needed repairs.

Like Beverly said, call when ready. He was still waiting for the timing to be just right. At night, Winston stretched across the end of the bed, and he stared up at the ceiling and counted the blinks of his eyelids, waiting for sleep to claim him.

It was the same ceiling as the one his father once stared up at, he figured. The associations came when darkness fell, and he pondered a mind so fragile as to fall apart and make new whenever stress became too much a burden to bear. Did Bill Graham lay awake those nights and wonder just what in the hell was wrong with his son just down the hall? Had he ever pressed an ear to the door when Will came to, screaming, or had he simply turned over in his sleep to ignore it? Will thought of each house they'd moved through like turning pages in a pop-up book, each life rising with the fall of the last.

Not for the first time, there was the lingering notion that not once in the entire time they'd lived there did Bill Graham ever go to check on his son in the middle of the night when he'd woken from a nightmare. Hard to say if it was because he was a heavy sleeper, or because he wasn't even home to check.

The medicine from the hospital was cold turkey. Insomnia haunted him in the weeks that followed his release. He needed another hobby.

-

JT's Bait Shop sat just outside of Wolf Trap National Forest, and that's where Will liked to do his shopping. It was quick, it carried Sour Cream and other essentials, and if you had to pick it out from around the fresh worms best used for fishing that were housed in small Styrofoam containers, that was your problem. Not JT's.

On one such trip, Will snagged a jug of milk that cost an extra buck sixty-eight--not worth a trip into town--and strolled to the counter, fishing out few small bills. The cashier was a teenager he'd seen in there before, a local kid that knew just about anybody, and just in front of Will stood a whole heap of frustration with a high blonde ponytail bobbing and jerking in frustration.

"I don't care what you think, two dollar bills do in fact exist, and you can't deny legal tender."

"Ma'am, I've never seen a two-dollar bill, and I'm not comfortable accepting this."

"But it's legal tender!"

"I've never even heard of a two-dollar bill."

"Is this a generational thing?!"

The teen at the counter was uncomfortable. Red was creeping up his neck in patches while he tried to reason with her. "Uh, it's more of a security thing..."

From behind, the woman's ponytail was the sort of honeyed blonde that caught colors under the hi-beam florescent bulbs. It quivered, then jerked as her head tilted just-so. "I'd google it if I thought that'd be enough to convince you."

"I'm more than happy to call my boss again if you'd like."

"Oh, JT is gonna pick up his phone this time, you think?"

"It's his son that owns it now, his name's Les," he said unhelpfully. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, nervous. Saying no to customers wasn't his past time.

"Les, yeah, my mistake!"

"Ma'am, if you could just-"

"I got it," said Will, and he laid the cash on the counter.

The woman turned, baby blue eyes prickling as she flipped her frustration onto him. "It's the principle of the thing, but thanks."

"He's not taking that bill."

"He is," she countered.

Will blinked, and there was a blurry moment in the bait shop where he swore it was Abigail glaring at him like that, all fire and brimstone. Lips pursed because Marissa had said something stupid, and she wanted to fix it. He blinked again, and the woman's face was warmer, her eye color less like still water and more like the foam cresting the wave. The sun was kind to her, and there was no sun to be kind to Abigail because she was most certainly dead.

"Hi, Will," the teen said, recognizing him from other sad little grocery trips. Relief was a rush of sweat that made the red rise up onto his cheeks. A local here to rescue him from the crimes of forged two-dollar bills. Tourist season was coming, and he wasn't going to be prepared for it. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," he said distractedly, then, "I don't mind."

"But I mind," she protested.

Will minded a lot of things, and this entire scenario was one of them. When the pause dragged, he let out a sigh and slapped down a few more bucks. "That's for the milk, too," he said to the kid, and he walked out of the shop to his truck. That fight wasn't his, and he had to stop doing that.

"Hey!"

He fished his key out and ignored the woman calling out to him. Winston was waiting in the truck, and he could hear the tail smacking against the jockey box before the door had even opened.

"Hey," she said again, reaching him at a jog. In the fast approaching sunset, the grasping fingers of light did her hair far more justice than the gas station lightbulbs had. "I was trying to talk to you."

"I'm trying to leave," he replied.

"Got someplace to be?"

"With milk?" He shrugged non-committedly. "Home."

Be it the indignantly puzzled look on her face or how her mouth worked the words over that she wanted to say, something made his hand hesitate on the handle. Her jaw clenched, unclenched, then she said, "I didn't need rescued in there."

"Over a couple of bucks, I'd believe it," he agreed.

"Why'd you do it, then?"

Why, indeed? Because that's what he did, even when he didn't quite want to, right? Fix things? Repair things? He shrugged and opened the door, stopping Winston just shy of leaping from the car to greet them. "Just being helpful, I guess."

She looked like she wanted to argue that a little more, but at the armful of dog, she was pleasantly distracted. "Is that your rush?" she asked. A smile warred with her indignation.

"Yes," he lied, working his fingers through Winton's fur. "Don't keep dogs in cars; isn't that the rule?"

"I think it's on hot days with the windows rolled up, but I get it," she agreed, and whatever war she'd felt the need to wage abated, there in a whirlwind and somehow all at once gone. "My name's Molly."

"I'm Will."

"I heard," she said, and her smile grew a little. She seemed older than him by just a year or so. It wasn't in her face, but in her eyes that seemed an even darker blue in the sunset. "You always this helpful to strangers, Will?"

"Sometimes," he said with a shrug. "Sometimes I'm not."

"I caught you on a good day, then?"

He glanced to the sky, then back to her eyes. His fingers felt soft wrapped in Winton's fur, although the dog breath was an issue. He'd need to get some dental chew-ables "...A pretty good day, yeah."

There was another pause, rough like the one inside the shop, but this one Molly seemed bent on breaking. She shifted from one foot to the other, and she tilted her head, ponytail swaying to the side. Her eyes cut to Winston, then back to Will. "You ever give your phone number out, or is this not that kind of good day?"

Do you date, Will?

Knee-jerk was to say no, there wasn't ever really a day like that for him because the few times he'd had days like that they'd ended up particularly awful, but the protest couldn't quite make it past his stomach. It rose with the acid, then stopped, waiting for something. His eyes traced over hair--wheat in the rapidly dripping sun--before something tugged at his lips, akin to a smile.

"I think it could be that kind of good day," he said, and he fished his phone out for her. "Sit," he said, and Winston sat in the driver's seat to wait.

She put her number in and passed it back to him. It was a curious thing, pressing send and letting it ring before he hung up and plugged in the name Molly with Winston's breath hot on his ear. He didn't want to quite call it excitement that stirred in his gut, but it was something too pleasant to be called anxiety. A girl wanted his number. A girl wanted him to call her.

"Call me sometime," she said as she went to save his number. The smile she flashed was cheeky as she glanced up. "You got a last name to go with that first one?"

He thought to lie about it, but the thought couldn't quite gain traction. Most people knew the name 'Will Graham', and likely in her pending searches through Google and Facebook she'd stumble across his tragic tale and every sordid detail of it. It surely meant that when the time came and he called she'd let it go to voicemail, the nice guy not-so-nice now that she knew just what it took for him to get there, but...

"Graham," he said, and he met her baby blues as he did. "Will Graham."

Chapter End Notes

Happy Saturday! If not for the election this week, I'd have had this guy to you yesterday, but long hours and even longer paperwork, ya know? :) On that note, ya'll have better voted!

Thank you all so very much for your kind words and support for this fic!! I'm so glad you're all ready for a revenge-riddled Will Graham with a bone to pick and a bad habit of Molly Foster always playing the perfect foil to how he is with Hannibal...I wonder what the Chesapeake Ripper will think about that?

Until next time!

Extemporaneous

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4: Extemporaneous

It always began with questions. The drugs prescribed made it difficult to handle the questions. Fog that spread, a head that dipped to whichever way the mind wanted to take him. It made lips glue, though, emotions difficult to handle in hands that didn't know how to hold them.

"Are you having nightmares?"

Will stared at the point fixed just beyond their shoulder. Dr. Lattic was their name, and they were as pleased as punch to have an intelligent psychopath like Will Graham in their clutches. They liked to tell them that whenever they appeared to witness him take his medicine.

"One of the orderlies thought they heard you crying out in your sleep." They made a note on their legal pad and observed him over their reading classes set to perch just at the edge of their nose. "Are you dreaming of the illness, or the things you've done?"

Jared Freeman paced behind Dr. Lattic, and Will tracked where he supposed he'd wander if he was stuck in such an interview as this. That they'd presume to understand him, that they'd suppose they'd ever seen into a mind like his...

"Dreaming of what he did while you slept under the blue," Garrett Jacob Hobbs whispered, just beside the doctor's ear. He was a rat. "What did he do to you whenever blue lights made you sleep?"

"I can't say that your cooperation will ease your sentence, given the things you've done, but if we can make you come to terms with some of the things your troubled psyche made you do, there might be something we can do to ease your experience here," Dr. Lattic said, tilting his head. A different tactic.

"Fool's gold," Jared snarled.

"The things done to you," Garrett Jacob Hobbs corrected. "You only enjoyed hurting the ones that tried to hurt you first."

The bloodstains on Hobbs' shirt never came clean. Will dreamed of washing it in a cold stream of thought, but it never came clean because you can't wash away bullets once they've been fired, and he'd learned that the hard way. He wondered if Abigail would have helped, if the monster under the bed hadn't decided to eat her, too.

"Silence for another session, I see. Perhaps we should lower the dosage. Your eyes are unfocused, and I wonder where your thoughts are directed today."

He was wheeled through two security doors before he's dumped into his cell, the cuffs released from his hands and feet only after he's laid back onto the bed. It's degrading, but emotions are fog. He can't grip one enough to feel it, and he lays in the damp of the low-budget facility midst the screaming of one of the other inmates whose lunch wasn't delivered at the right moment pertaining to their OCD.

-

Will visited Wolf Trap National Park when the body could only fix so much of the house. Things had to be taken slow, no matter how much his mind raced. He wondered if the ideas had begun to fester yet, if Hannibal had taken his bait.

He sat at the park and did as he often did, as he often had to do. It was a flat, open area with small spattering of oaks and sugar maples. Some Bradford Pears lined to the right threatened to stink the entire place up soon. A few people walked, mostly young adults or the elderly with small children. The playground nearby entertained the children as their guardians gossiped and caught up on old news. The latest body found was suspected to be the second body in the new Chesapeake Ripper wave. Much of the gossip, it seemed, circulated that, from hands that gripped and folded the newspaper article to mouths that puckered and pulled. Hard to talk about death at a park. Things were cheerful, there.

He thought about calling Molly, but it seemed in poor taste to call someone just to waste their time. Dating was commitment, dating was honesty and vulnerability and hands clasped just to walk down the grocery aisle. Still, she'd smiled so brightly when she realized he wasn't trying to be condescending. She looked like the type to like dogs.

He thought about time and hobbies and let his fingers idly scroll through his limited contacts on the phone. The Chesapeake Ripper probably wouldn't want him to date. Maybe he'd kill anyone that got too close to Will like he did last time. Maybe he wouldn't only until Will's guard was down.

It was the bird that caught his eye, even though he was supposed to be people-watching and letting the time pass. It limped along, not like the other birds around it that hopped for the worms bursting from the earth fresh from Spring rain. He stared for a moment, then another as it registered. When the bird tried to hop again, he stood from his lonely bench and slid his jacket off.

It was a male cardinal, bold and ruby red against the green. Its leg was bent oddly, and when it fluttered in panic at his approach, he stilled. "Easy," he murmured, and he wished it could be so easy as that. Say something, and it come true. Easy, and the bird was eased. Catch him, and the killer was caught.

He tossed the jacket and made the clumsy effort of scooping the bird up, all awkward elbows and quick hands. Its plaintive cries were muffled, and he straightened the arm of his jacket to try and give the bird some air flow.

"H-hey, hey," someone called, and Will turned to see a small-statured man with narrow shoulders and an uneasy expression. He stood hesitantly on the sidewalk, and he gestured once he had Will's attention. "I saw the bird...are you gonna h-help him?"

"Do you know how to help him?" Will asked. "Or do you know someone that can?"

"I-I can help him," he said, and his face brightened.

"You can?" Will smiled, and the cries of the bird didn't bother so bad.

"Follow me, I can help the bird..."

And just like that, Will found himself in the care of one of the stable hands that worked with the horses at the park. He managed to catch as much as they worked their way past the park, past the stables, and back towards a quaint white house whose trim matched the stables perfectly.

"Back here," he said, and the closer they got the brighter his face became. Behind the quaint white house sat a barn, and when Will ducked inside, he was greeted by the sound of dozens of birds, a disarming cacophony.

"Here, y-you can set him here." He gestured, and Will complied.

"Do you take care of all of these birds?" he asked, turning around. Now that the surprise of them wore off, their calls seemed more interwoven, less chaotic.

The man carefully unfolded the jacket and made quick work of securing the bird. "Yes."

Will smiled. "What's your name?"

"Peter." He glanced up, then away and smiled, his hold on the bird careful and gentle.

"I'm Will. I'll let you work...can I see him when you're done?"

"Ye-yeah, just wait out there...I'll call you in, he'll be okay."

Will headed out of the barn and gave Peter his space to work. A bale of hay sufficed for a seat, and he listened to the trailing calls of the birds inside, each secured in their own cage. Chickadees, scrub jays, a pigeon, doves, robins; maybe a caretaker on the grounds. Will had made a point not to look at the dent in the back of his head when he'd followed him.

Bird casts were delicate things, and Peter Bernardone took delight in Will being fascinated by it. He was humbly surprised by the care Will took in waiting, and they sat outside of the barn for awhile. Will felt a gentle disposition in him, as well as a genuine kindness.

"I love the animals, they...they don't do harm."

"They can do harm," Will said, thinking of Winston. He hadn't done harm until Agent Crawford decided to find out just who his previous owners ha been.

"Not like us...n-not like humans," Peter disagreed, and he watched a horse in the corral just across from the barn. "Humans are the only...the o-only ones to intentionally do h-harm. Animals don't have that, but we do."

Will couldn't argue that. If the latest killing was the Chesapeake Ripper, that artist hadn't stabbed himself in the chest before removing the kidneys. At least the animals wouldn't have let it go to waste.

"Is that why you work with animals? Because they're better than people?"

Peter laughed and looked down at the cage where the cardinal rested. The small cast dwarfed his stick-thin leg, but he'd assured Will it would heal. "Gotta p-protect them from people."

"We also have to protect people from people," said Will. "I think you're onto something.

He left the park a little while later, but only after asking Peter if it was okay if he came back.

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The news could be savage when it wanted to be. When it couldn't speculate farther on the latest killing to hit DC, it ruminated on the infamous Will Graham and how he was now alive and well and on the roam. Was he truly innocent, or an acolyte, the news wondered? Could he return to his life after four years of incarceration? Would he begin to amass a wealth of death to rival the Ripper's before the jury was out?

Insomnia was a bitch. When he dreamed, he dwelled on the shadows filling the hollows of Hannibal's cheeks. Awake, he lay in a half-coherent doze on the couch and let the TV drone, anything to keep him from thinking too much. He was tired, but not tired enough. The news speculated on his absence from any media outlet. A month free, and the victim wasn't ready to start talking yet. If he started getting cold calls, he'd have to change his phone number. He wanted his story to be as old and stagnant as a standard traffic stop.

Work was easy, mindless, and the house was looking great. University classes for credits were pending, and should he get accepted he'd be allowed to swing right into a summer semester and begin getting his degree. A GED in the cell wasn't as impressive as a diploma across a high school stage, but he'd take what he could get, should they let him in. At the end of the day, bosses just wanted to see a degree. How you got it was irrelevant.

"--membered, displayed, I mean, if we analyze this realistically then the only indication that it could be the Chesapeake Ripper is because their kidneys are missing!"

"So you're saying that you don't think it's the Chesapeake Ripper's latest kill?" the newscaster asked.

Their interviewee fluffed their coif lightly. "I'm just saying that it's a bit presumptuous this early to say. It could be, but normally this form of psychopath is a tad more...violent in his attack. A single stab wound?"

"A single shot," Will corrected her in the otherwise quiet living room. As if he could have stopped at one, should he have decided to pull the trigger.

"The kidneys are a tell-tale sign, though. Our analyst, Brice Hoey, can confirm that there are currently no other known serial killers in the area that take organs as trophies."

"It's too early to tell," their guest pressed, and they shook their head. "If there was more information on the crime scene, we could confirm if the Chesapeake Ripper's other calling signs are there, but until the next report is released, I can't put my stamp on the case."

"We could always ask Will Graham," the newswoman joked.

"I think any information from him would have to be verified before it could be taken as fact," they replied. "Encephalitis is a serious illness, and coupled with the other traumatic things that happened to him at a young age, it's difficult to say if we can trust--"

Whenever the topics steered towards his mental state, Will would find it in himself to let the silence of the house keep him company, instead. The expanse of it yawned, and there were no repairs to be easily made. He needed a distraction.

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Maybe that's why Will found himself pouring two cups of coffee one Friday morning a week or so later instead of one. Part time ensured he'd have time for some classes before Summer arrived and let him begin college in earnest. Hobbies. Busy hands. He'd called Molly and had the brutal pain of leaving a voicemail. All that courage, wasted in the face of a busy schedule. He'd stammered once before hanging up. Likely she'd been watching the news, too.

"You won't return my calls," Jack said, accepting the cup.

They sat out on the porch while Winston trotted about the yard, sniffing through the hesitant grass. Spring was trying its best in Wolf Trap.

"I won't," Will agreed, sitting down in the chair next to his. He'd re-stained them one evening, and they looked better than new.

"Have you watched the news recently?"

"I have," said Will.

"Then you know there's another body."

Winston was older, and it was apparent in how he didn't wander too long before trotting to Will and laying down at his feet. What was he, seven or eight? Will reached down and rubbed his ears affectionately.

"That's a nice dog you've got there, Will," Jack tried again.

"Same dog as the one you branded me a killer for," Will said curtly. Then, throwing somewhat of a bone, "he's a good dog. I didn't expect him to remember me."

Discomfort sat stupid between them for a time, each one sipping their coffee with grimaces. It was uncertain if it was the strong coffee or the silence that made it bitter. Will knew exactly what Jack wanted, only it was the very thing he didn't want to give. He had busy hands, only they didn't want to be busy with something like Jack and his manipulations. His mind was trying to confuse the two, though. It reasoned how much it wanted to do already.

"You see this person the way no one else does," Jack tried for a third time.

"I just interpret what I see in front of me."

"So just interpret something for me."

"Am I the only poor bastard you could corner on such short notice?" Will wondered incredulously. "Seriously."

"Who else would I ask?"

"Specialists, therapists, hell; ask Alana Bloom."

"I have gone to specialists, detectives, therapists, doctors, and every behavioral analyst known to hell and creation. None of them see him like you do. None of them saw the others like you did, Will. Otherwise I'd have never used you." There was a catch in his voice, something that seemed to surprise even Jack. "I'd have...never asked you to look if I didn't think you were saving lives."

"You think maybe I see him like no one else because I've spent the night at his house?" Will wondered. *Ever thought it was because I've fucked him?*

Jack ground his teeth. "I think it's because you look at things from a perspective uniquely yours. I think you pay the price for it, but you do it."

"And don't you wonder if I ever get tired of seeing things that way?" he asked, ashamed at how his own voice betrayed him. "Maybe I'd just like a simple life where I don't have to feel that way all the time. Shouldn't you care about something like that?"

"He's hurting people, Will," Jack needled, and it's there that Will was forced to feel the sunburn ache of Jack's guilt. "The longer I take to find him, the more people he hurts."

Winston made another round in the yard, and Will watched him halfheartedly chase a bird. "I'm not leaving this porch," he said. "And I don't want to see pictures, either."

Jack snatched the bone offered. "Okay."

He set his empty cup down and left Will to his own drink, the grounds fine enough some had seeped through the filter. He wasn't too experienced with making coffee, but he was trying. Learning adulthood was one step at a time and one Google search with each failure. He hadn't had a lot of people-watching in the hospital. He didn't have a lot to go on when he was learning how to get the stains out of a white t-shirt or timing the coffee grinder to keep the beans from turning to dust.

"The body was found in their workshop," Jack said, and he looked out across the field. Will wondered what memories Jack held of this place in comparison to his own. Ones no uglier, that was certain. "The victim is an artist, Sebastian Bibee, displayed in front of his work station. A young artist, one up-and-coming. No criminal history apart from one minor-in-possession."

Will thought about it; the news hadn't gone much into detail on how he was displayed. He was glad he'd had the thought to forbid pictures. Pictures would have made him see, and he didn't want to see Hannibal's wrath after being threatened in his own home by something so artlessly tasteless as a gun. "How was he displayed?"

"A single stab wound to the chest and a small surgical incision in the back. He took the kidneys."

"How do you know it's the Chesapeake Ripper, then?" Will asked dubiously.

"That's what I'm talking to you for. The media's looking for answers, but I won't give them one until I know for sure."

Will stood up and took Jack's empty cup, using that as an opportunity to think as he went through the motions of making another one. When he set it down, he leaned against the post on the porch and frowned, cramming his hands into his pockets.

"Could have been someone harvesting organs," he said slowly. He thought of one of the late night guest speakers on the news. "Normally they leave them alive, though, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Could've gone wrong."

"The painting on the easel was *Jael and Sisera*," he said, and his expression sobered as he looked Will over. "Does that mean something to you?"

"Should it mean something to me?"

"I'd show you a picture if I thought it'd help," he offered.

"I'll look it up later," he promised.

Jack looked out over the field, and if his memories of those awful days haunted him, it didn't show on his face. Only time did. Time, and a bitter sense of wounded pride. Will wondered how much crow he'd had to eat when the time came that he'd realized Will wasn't the killer. A dark part of him wished he'd lost his job over it, but the FBI takes care of their own. The good old boys club, and Jack was just trying to be a good, old boy.

"It's a bible story," he explained. "Jael promises aid to a defeated Canaanite leader, Sisera, and while he sleeps she drives a peg through his head. One of my guys said it's pretty symbolic."

"Pretty something," Will grimaced.

"You think you're in danger, saying it's him?"

"No," Will lied, only it was the kind of lie he'd practiced in the hospital, the kind orderlies didn't think to look for. "I'm not the only thing that revolves around this guy, Jack. He was killing long before me, and he'll kill long after if he's not caught."

"I don't think that's necessarily the case," Jack argued.

"Who says he's not threatening to kill you? Lull you into a sense of security, then drive a peg through your head just when you think you're getting close."

It was like being at the crime scenes again, only Will wasn't eighteen and sick and terrified and naive. Age didn't feel like wisdom, but it made it easier to talk back to Jack, to pick up his ebb and flow of speech and accidentally mimic it. He wondered what they'd done with the FBI jacket he'd used to tote around--likely rotting in an evidence locker somewhere.

Jack scowled, and he sat on that for a bit. "...What's that mean for the body?" he asked the coffee mug.

"Fuck all about the body, it's just another tool to him. Humans are tools to him."

Winston trotted back once more and laid down.

"Who's he trying to direct it at, then," Jack mused. "Me or you?"

"I bet he's hoping you ask me that, and you did." Will grinned. "What's that say about you, Jack?"

Jack stewed on that, and he didn't finish his second cup of coffee. They watched the breeze tease small shoots of tall grass out in the field.

"How's he choosing them?" Will murmured, more to himself than Jack.

"Don't you know?"

"If I knew, I'd have found him a long time ago." Will chewed on his thumb, stewing. Some symbolic, some close, some far away and strangers. "I wonder what connects them."

"We're looking for connections, but apart from the ones that all had relationships with you they don't have any correlation. Seemingly random, even before you came along."

Will had nothing for that. He thought about the artist, and he resisted the urge to ask for a photo.

When Jack left, he didn't promise not to call, but he didn't say they'd be in touch soon either. Will took it as a bit of a win, and he went back to mend a bit of fence he'd noticed needed repair while they talked.

Will looked up *Jael and Sisera* on his phone long after Jack left, and he stared at it for awhile, thinking. Thoughts leapt like the fish in the river back behind the house, plentiful and

distracting, and he supposed that if it was the Chesapeake Ripper's response to Will pointing a gun at him, it was time that he toss the line in again. He had a fish ready to bite.

Jael, knelt, poised, her lap the pillow Sisera lay his head to sleep. The expression on her face was not violent as she pressed the nail to his ear. For a moment, he saw it much like her carving thoughts, ideas, beliefs into him. He blinked, and the hammer just above would surely strike too hard to be of any aid once she had finished crafting his mind. Surely the mallet would strike, and her creation would be obliterated? Surely everything would be destroyed in the aftermath of her actions?

An artist recreating it, only they were interrupted. Had he finished the painting? Was Sebastian stopped halfway, a single stab wound to the chest the only thing keeping him from finishing his work? Jael's mallet never striking the nail, dust never again beaten from the marble. Frozen on the canvas, she looked to Will much like Hannibal, carving secret things into whatever dark crevices he could find. Had Will killed him that night, would Hannibal's creation have been considered finished? Or would Jael's hammer have fallen and taken Sisera with her in the end?

Will couldn't have said, but he thought about it long after. Insomnia was a bitch, and so was Jack Crawford.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Friday, and here we are... :)

Thank you all for the kind and thoughtful comments/messages! I love seeing ya'll guesses and meta/analysis with each chapter...some of you are maybe right in not trusting all of Will's ideals and best laid plans. >:)

Sequels make me nervous, ya'll. I'm so excited for this, but this is my first sequel, sooo...on another adventure we go. I swear, each story is a new style I'm trying out, and you've been understanding and patient and supportive through each one! I can only hope I deliver.

Foil(s)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5: Foil(s)

Two weeks later brought a quarter-long photography class, as well as a history class that didn't care so long as the final by the end of the semester was a passing grade. They kept him busy, helped him get his mind focused on the long work ahead, the structure and necessity of it. Jail had given his mind the time to wander, to roam within the confines of his cell. Now, the openness, the freedom of it was staggering, and he desperately needed to fill it. He had to stay busy. He needed distractions. His was a bait that took its time to cast and be bit.

The news let the death slip under the current of more engaging stories that had a neat bow to tie on the end of them. Will resisted looking up the murder that'd coupled potently with Beverly's thesis and led to his release. What notes had the Chesapeake Ripper trailed along there?

He reasoned one painting was enough. One photo. He didn't look up the first murder.

Insomnia led to studying *Jael and Sisera* in the darkness of his groaning home. If it was Hannibal--the longer he looked, the more sure of it he was-- it was a fitting sort of painting to have been the victim's last to paint before death. Will should have asked Jack for a picture of it, if nothing else. Had the Ripper placed it there, or had Sebastian truly been painting such a classical recreation? How had he chosen him? What had made him choose the poor man?

School would help with the insomnia. If he kept his hours busy, he would be too tired to stay awake.

It was in that very first class that he met Francis Dolarhyde, and that was only because Will had gotten lost and slipped in right in the middle of roll call, late but undeterred. Francis Dolarhyde sat alone, although he wasn't bothered when Will sat beside him at the table farthest back from the board. Will pulled out his notebook and his homework, raising his hand less than a minute later when his name was called. Dolarhyde's broad shoulders and muscled build took up nearly half of the table, but they'd just have to manage.

"You have a...nice dog," Francis observed, nodding to Will's photograph. It was an introductory aspect to the class: Tell Us About You.

"Thanks." He glanced over to Francis' photograph of a painting, something that'd been purposefully set up on an easel in the middle of the forest. A photo of a painting; the artistic type. "Do you like that painting, or do you like the aesthetic?"

Francis Dolarhyde had a square jaw and short, buzzed brunette hair. He turned to look at his photograph, and the scarring at his lip gave his smile an altogether crooked appearance.He was easily the biggest guy in class, the jock that all the girls wrote home about. "My favorite

painting. *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed With the Sun*," he said carefully. His voice caught on the hiss of the 's'.

"Your favorite painting?"

He nodded.

"This has been my favorite painting as of late," Will shared, and for reasons he couldn't quite explain he pulled out his phone and showed his table-mate *Jael and Sisera*.

Maybe it was the fact that it was an absolute stranger, or maybe it was the fact that his painting seemed just as raw beneath the surface of the oil. He had a lot of alone time at the house. Just Will and Winston. Going to school would force him to be sociable. The dragon lay poised just beneath the maiden, prepared to devour her. Jael lay poised just above Sisera, ready to impale him.

Francis gave the painting a long, searching look, and he seemed to see the same. "I wonder if she'd bear his screams the way she bears the dust from the labor of carving her will into stone," he commented, and he looked to Will with a briefly flickering expression of interest. "He lay like marble."

"I think she'd bear them well enough," Will said, and he looked at her. "I don' think this is the first time she's done this."

"Nor the last?"

Will thought of Alana curling up in Hannibal's bed, cozy, and nodded gravely.

"Do you know why he would have been foolish enough to put his head beneath her hammer?"

"He trusted her enough and fell asleep," Will said. "That was his undoing."

"The moral, then, is don't make his mistake," Francis said, and too late Will realized it was a dryly- uttered joke.

"Wish I'd gotten that advice a long time ago," he said with a smile.

Francis Dolarhyde laughed, a soft huff, and it was decided they could work together for the quarter.

Two weeks also took him on a date with Molly Foster, whose returned call was so upbeat and pleasant despite his awkward voicemail that he hadn't had the heart to begin to explain why maybe she shouldn't go on a date with him. Would the Chesapeake Ripper target her, should he get too close? Would he kill her in a fit of rage the way he had Charlie?

He found the nicest restaurant he could expect closeby, and so they enjoyed endless cheesy biscuits at Red Lobster. She didn't know him; he reasoned she wouldn't want to stray too far away from home.There was a killer about, or didn't she know?

"That's great that you're going to school. I barely finished, but I'm waiting for something to take off. I hear DC's a good place to look, so that's why I moved here." She had an honest, girl-next-door look that made the conversation flow despite the fact he couldn't quite meet her eyes more than twice throughout the main course.

Nerves had, in truth, gotten the best of him. It was the first honest, genuine date he'd ever been on, after all.

"Photography isn't my thing, but it was the only quarterly class they could offer on such short notice. I just wanted to get started. The history professor said that as long as the final had a passing grade, he'd allow it." He focused on her lovely blouse, floral beneath a cozy cardigan. The orange restaurant lights made her skin golden. "What did you study?"

"Business analysis...no, no I know, boring," she laughed, seeing his expression. It made him look up and meet her eyes, warm and inviting. "That's why I'm taking my time. I want to analyze the right business."

"You're careful in choosing," Will said then, looking to her lips, "as an analyst."

"I am," she agreed, and she stared unabashedly back.

Then he walked her to her car, and she stood blinking up at him, the lights burning from the lamp posts illuminating her face in a fuzzy, warm orange. "I had fun tonight, Will Graham."

"I did too, Molly Foster," he mimicked her inflection lightly, and he managed to look away from the collar of her cardigan to meet her eyes. He smiled slightly, although he couldn't keep her gaze.

"I'd want to go on a second date, if you wanted to take me on it."

His mouth turned to cotton, and his smile grew, guilt doing its best to curtail the pleasure that threatened to overtake his voice. "I'd like to take you on a second date."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and he waited until she drove off until he turned and went back to his truck. He stood by it for a time, thinking, then kicked the tire angrily and drove away.

He felt guilty, but after the second date, there was a third. The Chesapeake Ripper did not add a third body to his pile, and Molly enjoyed a walk through the national park to witness the sunset over the Wolf Trap trees. He wondered if she'd looked him up yet. He wondered if Hannibal had looked her up yet. He wondered if it was really all that smart to try and enter into a relationship when your bait was set for a different kind of fish that bit harder and left marks.

By the fourth date, he finally had to say something. Molly made it easy to keep busy, from occasional phone calls to daily texts but now their dates had accumulated too quickly. Too many dates. People didn't go on dates like that unless they meant something by it.

"I'll call you," she said warmly, and they were parting at her car after a rousing round of bowling where she'd soundly beaten him. The neon lights of the bowling alley sign cast her in a cotton candy pink.

"Molly," he began, and she paused from leaning in to give him a soft, chaste kiss on the cheek. She'd done it the last three times, and he'd liked it enough he often touched fingers to the place hours later, puzzled over it. Hannibal had never done that to him. He had toyed with asking Alana for comparison. "I really enjoyed tonight."

Her smile remained, but her eyes belied whatever it was she was seeing on his face. "Why are you saying that like you didn't enjoy tonight?

"I...I don't know if I can take you on another date."

Her blue eyes were purple in the pink light. They blinked slowly, wide and doe-like in the neon. "What's wrong?"

He couldn't quite look at her, eyes off towards the dark spaces where the Chesapeake Ripper could always be lurking, watching. He wondered if he'd get another card on his kitchen table. "I..I like you."

"Okay," she said, suddenly uncertain.

"I've just got a lot of...baggage." He nodded. That was one way of putting it. "Things I don't want you to have to get involved in."

"We all have baggage, Will," Molly replied, and something in her tone made him look back to her, her eyes glassy and her mouth quirked into a half-smile that wasn't at all amused. "Life is about people making connections with other people and learning to deal with their tragic back-stories and baggage."

He wondered what baggage she was afraid of showing him, if it was a bad boyfriend or a bad case of body parts under the floorboards. "Mine could endanger your life," he said seriously; then had the misfortune of seeing the exact moment that she questioned his sanity, the moment she realized maybe she shouldn't want to go on another date with him.

How must that sound to a sane person, Hannibal would have said. *These people with their mundane lives. You sound unhinged and delusional, Will.*

"I...don't know what to say to that," she admitted, and her nose wrinkled. "It sounds like...a gimmick? Yeah, a gimmick." Her head bobbed, much like it had when the poor kid at JT's Bait Shop couldn't understand the concept of a two dollar bill. "If you don't want to continue dating, you can just say so. I won't get mad. I appreciate honesty, though."

"Did you look me up when you first met me?" he asked bluntly. Maybe a little too harsh? He managed to stare at the edge of her denim jacket, purposefully baggy and rumpled.

She paused for a long time, and he couldn't quite look to her face to see why. "...No. Did you look *me* up?"

"No," he replied quickly. "I respect people's privacy."

"Liar," Jared Freeman jeered behind her. *"You don't respect Hannibal Lecter's privacy."*

"I guess I was going to until I saw you make the look on your face that you're making right now," she said, and her voice softened. She pitied whatever it was she was seeing in him. Fear? Maybe. Maybe a bit of self-disgust. Maybe some resignation in the lines by his mouth. "Made me think maybe you didn't feel comfortable with the idea of it."

"Statistically speaking, that means you could have gone on a date with a rapist," he pointed out, although he couldn't say why. He didn't want to frighten her, for God's sake. Did he have to be so nervous? He'd survived a psychopath twice over, and yet the idea of seeing the look on her face made his knees weak?

"I have mace," she assured him. "And you didn't give me that impression. Kinda...more like you were running from something."

"Someone," he said, much softer. He sighed, something more resigned than angry. "It's okay to look me up, but I'd ask you reserve judgement until you also ask me whatever questions you have. I'll try and be as honest as I can...I promise I'm not what they thought I was."

"Okay, Will Graham," she said, and she swooped up and pressed a firm, warm kiss on his open mouth. He inhaled it, and his breath caught. "Like I said, I'll call you."

"Okay," he replied, much too late. She was already getting into her car and starting it, the darkness of the cab casting her in shadows.

He had assignments due, otherwise he would have puzzled over that kiss for most of the night. As it was, he passed his fingers over it and thought of how he'd once drunkenly kissed Alana Bloom so boldly, with nothing to lose and a mind melting from the fire. He felt charmed, but then again; he'd been charmed by Hannibal, too. He took photos of Winston walking through the tall grass that had burst from an early morning rain with a camera he'd snagged from the nearby Wal-Mart. Photography wasn't his thing, but he was going to try. If he could pass these, they'd allow him to enter a full-time status for the summer program.

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Then, the second letter came.

My Dear Will Graham,

When I saw your release from prison, I thought: Dare I? Of course I do. I would not have risked corresponding with you while you were incarcerated, in case it was used against you. I who have looked up to your work, who has ascended from it on a level that I know you would understand.

That is what it is you do, is it not? Understand?

I believe we have much in common, you and I. They're calling you innocent now, but they will only do their best to find other ways of locking you up again. You can't have taken her lungs

so clean and they not try to find means again of caging you.

I have something to show you. I think you'd appreciate it; maybe see what it is I aim to ascend to and Become. Until then, I remain your,

-Avid Fan

This one Will found laying propped against his screen door. It felt like pills souring in his stomach to read it, and he sat out on the porch steps for a long time, thinking. Just in front of him, he imagined Jared Freeman pacing back and forth, back and forth.

"Call someone," he suggested, and his gaze darted about. *"Can't trust the cops, but that Crawford guy..."*

"Don't call Molly Foster," Garrett Jacob Hobbs advised. Will agreed.

He needed to call her at some point to now definitely cut things off. If the Chesapeake Ripper was calling himself an Avid Fan now, that was one alias too many to make sure he'd be able to keep her safe, should Hannibal decide to lash out. Had he witnessed their kiss? Had he crept, lurking and careful in the bushes and witnessed that there was someone else in the world that thought Will capable of receiving affection?

Problem was, it didn't feel like the Chesapeake Ripper baiting him, all cruel words hidden behind kind veneers of pleasant professionalism. It felt different, foreign. Rather than mocking, biting, the way the Chesapeake Ripper surely would be after finally allowing Will to be released, the words felt...awed. The person that wrote this thought that Will circumvented the law. They thought he was a killer.

They wanted to show him something, too.

It took a long time for him to realize the tapping noise in the static of his thoughts was his fingers on the deck, but that didn't stop it. They tapped, his heart stuttered, and Will Graham wondered just who in the hell he was supposed to tell about this, or if he'd been crying wolf for so long that no one could bother to care.

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Will took a walk and found himself sitting with Peter Bernardone, just outside of the barn where he nursed birds back to health and set them free when possible. He spoke lovingly of a parakeet that had an attachment to him, one whose wing wouldn't unfold quite right. It eased at the ragged bite of the morning to think of things once broken made new. Peter was kind, and he desperately needed to think on kind things.

"I'm glad you came," Peter said, and they shared root beers Will had picked up on the way. He wasn't sure what it was he was hoping to find, sitting there beside him. He couldn't burden someone like Peter with something so horrific as the things he knew, the way he often woke up feeling the ghosts creeping just down the hall from where he once slept.

Was this Hannibal? Or was this someone new? If it was Hannibal, just what did that mean for him? Just what did he want to show to Will, and what was Will going to do to stop it?

If it wasn't Hannibal, just how in the hell was he going to detangle himself from it before he woke up with another killer strangling him to death? God, he was getting tired of drowning on the blood of so many innocent.

"Thanks for making time to talk," Will replied, and they sat on the bales and watched the horses.

"A-are you okay?" Peter asked, and he peered over at Will gravely. "You look...awful sorrowful about somethin'." He was keener than he seemed. Being around animals, he saw the small expressions most didn't notice.

"Have you ever had a secret that you tried to share, but no one would believe you?" Will asked. "Something that was really important, but no one thought you were telling the truth?"

Peter stilled, and the finches in the cage at their feet entertained the air around them before he found the words he was looking for, jaw working furiously. "I...yeah, I know about that."

"You do?" Will asked, surprised.

"I b-been thinkin' about tellin' people the truth...maybe they believe me, maybe not, but I gotta say somethin'. You said something, I heard. You told the truth, even when no one believed you."

Will couldn't meet his gaze, embarrassed. Everyone knew who the infamous Will Graham was, even Peter. He couldn't go anywhere without someone knowing his fucking name.

"I feel like right now I have to keep it a secret to get what I want in the end," said Will, and he swung his legs, kicking the hay bale beneath them. He timed the swings with his heartbeat.

"What do you want in the end?"

"Justice." Kind of.

Peter nodded. "That's not so bad. You...should do what gets justice."

Will nodded resolutely. He still wasn't sure what to do about the letter. Not for the first time, the sound of Jack Crawford filled his mind, angry and haggard: What if wasn't Hannibal Lecter? What if the Chesapeake Ripper is someone they didn't know or understand in any capacity, and Will was taunting an innocent man as well as a killer?

"You should too," he said. He wasn't sure if he should ask what it was Peter felt that no one would believe. It felt private, grave. "I don't regret it. Maybe I'd have done it a little different, but I'd have still done it."

"Oh, I...I will." Peter's brow furrowed, and he looked down to the finches and cooed to them, gentle. "I think if...i-if we don't stand up for somethin', no one will."

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The time between a morning shift and a mid-afternoon class was staggeringly short. Will managed a bag of dollar burgers from McDonalds, and he'd gotten two of them shoved down his throat before he was driven to a stop by the large crowd of people that buffeted the sidewalks beside the dorms.

"So fucking scary, oh my god..."

"--couldn't believe they got in there, how'd they--"

"You know they keep the back door open, sick fuck probably strolled right in..."

"I need to call my dad."

"Back up, back up!" This from a police officer that was busy sectioning off part of the walkway towards the dorms. "I understand that some of you live here, but you'll need to give us a minute, please."

"What's going on?" Will asked, only for the cop to brush by him with the police tape in hand. He didn't spare Will a second glance, and there was something ironic to it, that at eighteen he'd had more access to that sort of information than he does now.

"Someone got killed," a student next to him replied, eyes across the quad. "In the Tower Dorms."

"What?"

"Yeah," they said with a nod. There was a thumb print on their left glasses lens, likely adjusted during a particularly rousing round of note-taking. "Someone says the mirrors in the bathroom are broken, and it's bad."

Will first thought of Hannibal, and how maybe he'd pushed the Chesapeake Ripper a little too far. But then he thought of the letter in his pocket, how it hadn't sounded so much arrogant as it was admiring, and a strange cold seemed to settle into his feet and make it hard to walk away.

"Who did they kill?" he asked, hoarse.

"Dunno yet, but it was the first floor and..." they grimaced, their thin lips puzzling over whatever was on their mind. "She was naked," they finally added.

"FBI," Will observed, and he chewed on his bottom lip. If Jack Crawford was there, he was going to be most decidedly not.

"You think a serial killer?" a young woman asked the student next to him. "FBI doesn't just show up to a homicide."

"I think whatever it is, it's bad enough the FBI showed up," the kid next to him said, somber. "Guys probably just strolled in and said they'd take it from here."

And that felt like Will's queue to leave. He waited for the space behind him to shift just slightly, and he made a break for it, slipping along the side leading away from the crime scene. If it was a serial killer, it was Jack Crawford's department. If it was psychological, it was Jack Crawford's department.

If it had anything to do with the note in Will's pocket, it was Jack Crawford's department.

"Jason just texted and said it was the girl that was in the room next to his friend Hayley," a girl said, thumbs frantically working prose across the keyboard.

"Oh my god, she knew her?"

"What if he's not done?"

Will skirted around them and tucked his hands into his pockets, tense.

"We don't even know what he did. How could we know if he's done?"

He'd just rounded the corner to safety when he had the misfortune of walking right into the very man he was trying to avoid.

"Will," Jack greeted, falsely cheerful.

"Jack," Will said warily, taking a step back. He was half a breath away from running. Prey was flight, fight, or freeze, and Will wasn't going to fight a battle like this.

"Will! We were just talking about you," his photography teacher exclaimed. She was a pleasant, upbeat woman with a habit of gesturing wildly when caught up in the middle of her lectures. Her passion was photography of animals, as she'd confided in Will on the first day. Today, that was deflated in the wake of the ripple of rumor, the sudden sense that all was not well and good within the walls of learning. There were stress lines near her forehead and eyes.

"Why?" he asked, looking at Jack Crawford.

"Well--because--" she fumbled at that, and she looked to Jack beside her.

Jack had been waiting for his moment. "Because unfortunately, Will, you are a person of interest considering the nature of your own history."

Unfortunately, like Jack didn't love the opening this was going to give him to wheedle back into Will's life and make himself at home. One unpleasant house visit wasn't enough. The letter burned in his pocket. "Murders aren't common on campus until I show up," he said to his teacher.

"Now, really what we want is to establish a base of support," Ms. Newman explained quickly. Her eyes cut to Jack, then back. They were red despite her brave face. "You being here has nothing to do with what's just happened, but because of your past Agent Crawford wanted to make sure that you're in a safe place mentally and physically."

"Oh I'm as safe as he wants me to be," Will assured her.

Jack's eyes narrowed. Will hadn't specified which 'he'. "Will you come with me?"

Will did a congenial u-turn and waited expectantly. "Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice! Agent Crawford, really I must--"

"Ms. Newman, it looks like one of your students needs you," Jack redirected, and Will looked up at the sky that threatened to be a positively beautiful day.

"You've always had a choice," Jack said, after Ms. Newman was well enough on her way to support Will from a distance.

"Sure didn't feel that way, Agent Crawford," said Will, not unkind. Not quite kind, either. The sky was the sort of blue one could get lost in.

He was glad the crowd prevented any further discussion, and they worked their way to the now thoroughly strung-up police tape. Will got to enjoy being the spectacle of walking under the rope with an FBI agent after just talking about it with someone in the crowd, and there was a tight feeling in his chest that had nothing to do with the note in his pocket or the thought of Hannibal's next move.

"I thought you were done being his dog," Jared said, and he circled Jack as they walked across the dewy grass and cut dark swathes of ribbon towards the crime scene.

"It's not really the Chesapeake Ripper's style, but it is right on campus," Jack said. Will's chest constricted in response. "I don't know if you want to know about the victim, or--"

"I don't want to know about the victim," he said, voice tinny. "I don't even want to be here right now."

Something about that kept Jack from answering, and they walked into the maw of the dorm hall with trepidation and steps that echoed too loud on the marble tile.

The room is 213, and Will stared at it for a long time. It's a dorm room on the first floor, and it occurred to him after about first five seconds of staring that it's an odd number for a first floor. Not 113, 213. That stuck, even after the door opened. It hit the wall, and 213 seemed to hit a little harder, and he thought of the first time he'd ever felt someone's hands wrapped tight around his throat, squeezing.

"Will?"

Will blinked, and he followed Jack into the dorm room, sweat collecting on the back of his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Sunday! So sorry for the delay in posting...the holidays are coming upon us, and although I feel optimistic about posting weekly (this is a goal I've set okay ya'll) I have also preemptively gotten a holiday planner because things are about to get busy, ya'll. Prepare yourselves and have a fun holiday season!

A big round of thanks for all of the fun meta and analysis! Your support makes this so much fun, and I appreciate every bit of it. Have a great Sunday, and enjoy. :)

Mimesis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 6: Mimesis

The room lay in rich ribbons of red.The sun cut blinding through the curtains, and Will had to stand in the entryway for a long time before he could quite bring himself to enter. He felt the screams suspended in the air, filling it with a heaviness that threatened to burst. If he entered, he broke the seal. His own scream had sat tucked under his tongue for years. He wasn't ready to give in just yet.

"Whenever you're ready," Jack assured him.

Will supposed he'd never be ready. He'd always keep falling into these things, these imprints and creeping crevices other killers have left behind.

I have something to show you.

He walked into the room slowly, and he stepped around the large stains of blood that soaked the floor in wild streaks. It bubbled in some places at the pressure his steps made, and he looked away from it so that he didn't get lost. He lifted his jacket sleeve to cover his nose at the stench of blood that rotted the air, like fruit too long on the branch.

She was beautiful, and he only thought it after staring for a long, long time. Shock had to shift through him, work from head to tingling toes, and he imagined Jared staring for a long time, vibrating with an emotion he couldn't name. Garrett Jacob Hobbs mournfully sat by her feet and cradled his head.

"He didn't honor her," Garrett said.

"He claimed her," Jared said, aggrieved. And yet, puzzled and understanding, *"he loved her."*

"The mirrors in the bathroom are smashed?" Will recalled, turning around. To his surprise, he was speaking to an empty room. Jack had left him.

All the better to address his questions to the dead.

She was naked, and it was apparent in the way she lay that she'd been raped. Her arms were spread wide in supplication, and the color had begun to fade from lips that were swollen from rough, wild bites. Her open eyes were hidden by shards of mirror. Will leaned over and stared into his own eyes, heart gone quiet and still in a room that'd been made to house fear.

I have something to show you.

Bite marks colored otherwise beautiful and unmarred skin. Her breasts were covered in an obscenely modest way with larger shards of glass, as well as her sex. Will stared down her

legs, then paused on painted toenails done haphazard and smudged in some places. Absently, his fingers found the edge of the letter in his jacket, the one from his Avid Fan.

"He didn't wait for them to dry before he raped her," Jared observed.

"He coveted her. This was control," Will murmured. His skin was damp with sweat.

He blinked, and he was outside of the warehouse where Charlie's screams surely still echoed in the metal. Jack was railing on him, and all he could think of was Hannibal, how Hannibal would surely know what to do.

The paint bore the weight of her screams poorly. They'd surely need a new coat before the next student moved in.

Will walked out into the hall, and he stuffed his hands into his pockets to hide the shaking. Jack regarded him, leaning against the wall across from him, and the space between began to rot. His fist crumpled the letter deeper into his pocket. He didn't pull it out.

"Not the Chesapeake Ripper," Jack began.

"Not the Chesapeake Ripper," Will agreed.

"A student on campus?"

"Someone that has seen her feet," Will replied, not quite an answer. He frowned and looked down the suspiciously empty hall. "How hard was it to clear everyone out for you to interrogate me?"

"I outrank everyone," Jack assured him curtly. Then, "Someone that saw her feet. Why do you say that?"

"You think someone would paint her own toes that bad? They're all smudged and messy." He watched Jared pace back and forth, back and forth. Conflicted about the murder. "Done like someone knew they didn't have time."

He clenched his jaw to stop the shaking, bit his lip to stop the tremble. He wondered if the Chesapeake Ripper was watching nearby.

"You think he knew her?"

"I think he watched her," Will said. Then, "he'd have seen the full moon out of her window. There were spots by window like he was there awhile. Footprints."

"The full moon?" Jack asked, skeptical.

Will shrugged. "He'd have seen it at that angle. That's all."

Jack watched him for awhile, and Will ignored it. He desperately ignored the stupid, knee-jerk reaction that after a run-in with Jack, he should call Hannibal.

"You really hate standing here across from me," Jack marveled, quiet.

Will carefully decided not to say anything to that.

"Does it hurt you so much, looking at things like that?" he asked.

"Is that a question?" Will countered, reaching up to scrub the fury and the fear out of his mouth. God, the fear... "All I have gotten to know is death. I'd like to see something better for once."

"I can get that," Jack agreed, ready.

"I think you mean well, but I think you don't give a fuck about me so long as it gets you what you want. So that means, you see me like you see a tool." Will took an inordinate amount of pleasure in the way Jack's face slackened in shock, gut-punched. "You know who else used me, much like a tool? The Chesapeake Ripper."

"Now hold on just a--"

"When a guy ignores your calls, you take the hint and stop calling," Will said, hollowly dangerous. "Dating 101. Stop calling, Jack."

He turned and walked out of the hallway, past the staggered groups of policemen and agents that watched with expressions he studiously avoided. Eyes were going to be a troubling thing, today. He'd covered her eyes. He'd wanted someone to see.

I have something to show you.

The moment he was past the police tape, he broke into a run and barely made it to the restrooms before he vomited into the first toilet he could get to.

-

He came to Hannibal Lecter's front door that time, and he even gave the courtesy of knocking. The sun hit his eyes at just the right shade of garnet when the door opened. Will looked, then looked away, and he swallowed down the instinctive urge to put as much distance between himself and the Chesapeake Ripper as he possibly could. Some part of him, some secret part, remembered just what it was to feel regarded by him. Admired by him.

That is the danger of a lie, though. It often tastes just as sweet as a truth, as good going down as any other.

Out in the front yard of his ridiculously opulent townhouse in downtown Baltimore, cherry trees bloomed white blossoms with swirls of watered-down blood on their petals.

"No gun," he promised, and he held up the letter he'd kept from Jack. "We need to talk."

Hannibal blinked, languid. "I can't stay away if you keep coming to me." There was a long, calculating pause before his head tilted, and he stepped to the side, offering his entryway despite his words to the contrary.

Will walked in before his body could quite override his brain, and the door swallowed them up once more. That time, Hannibal's shoulder just behind Will's was a ripple of something much like a bad memory that glazed the air with the stench of rotted things. He blinked, and he imagined the room's ribbons of blood like sweeping arcs of a dramatic artist. They'd loved each carved ribbon they'd cut into her skin. Art.

He stopped Will in a parlor, the blinds drawn open wide and the Oriental rug an antique. Will stood on it and felt his heels grind into the fibers. His skin prickled, and he wasn't sure if it was because of Hannibal or because he kept seeing her arms cast wide in supplication. Maybe not knowing the name and the girl was somehow worse.

"Do you mean to try and trap me by coming here unannounced all the time, Will?" he asked. Despite the question, he didn't seem entirely upset. It'd been weeks since he'd killed the artist after all. His calling card. Whatever his anger at Will's intrusion, it'd passed. A cathartic thing, killing people, Will supposed.

Will chewed on his bottom lip and tasted pennies. "I didn't mean to come back, but I ironically realize this is the only place that I have to turn."

Hannibal's brow quirked just slightly. "A dire place to be for someone whose mind turns me over as yours does."

"Yes."

"You managed to set aside your anger at me to come all this way."

"I received this on my doorstep."

He held out the letter without ceremony, and Hannibal accepted it without sitting down. The rays cut through the glass and made his suit as burnt as his eyes as he first looked Will over, then read the letter with wide, sweeping cuts. Will tucked his hands behind his back to have something to do with them. He tried desperately not to cut his gaze back to the man before him that four years ago had stood in a room much like this and told him that he was beautiful. He tried not to think about the girl with the mirrors for eyes.

Four years hadn't changed the Chesapeake Ripper much. He still sported a suit whose hemline cut at just the right spot against his shoe, and his jawline was cruel as he puzzled over the words someone had poured lovingly onto the paper. The longer Will sat on it, the less and less he could reconcile those words with the man before him. They were too kind. They were too admiring. This man before him that'd smeared the blood of Nicholas Boyle onto his cheeks before kissing him would care nothing if Will approved the performance.

The Chesapeake Ripper could only fathom destruction, and Will's blend of it was most delectable.

"Are you trying to ask me because you think I'm a killer?" he asked blandly, at last.

"I'm asking because you are a psychiatrist, killer or not," said Will.

"I'm not supposed to give legal advice."

"I don't want legal advice, I want to know what sort of person leaves something like that at my door."

"The better question is what sort of person you think left this at your door," he countered, and he handed the letter back to Will, expression placid. "This happened to you. It is how you react that determines the validity of it."

"I think you know perfectly well that it wouldn't look good for something like this to be shown to the cops. I don't really have a lot of options on who to go to. I believe the writer knew that."

"So you go to the person you suspect as the one that first incarcerated you," Hannibal said with a smile. It didn't reach his eyes. That first flicker was gone.

Will had turned that over about as much as he'd turned the letter over the day before, the hair on his arms periodically rising up on end as the possibilities around him rose, endless. He'd had to fold and compact each one. "I just..."

"We haven't spoken in four years, Will, and the first time we speak you do so only with a gun held to me. Now, you show up in a haphazard state and claim that someone has left this on your doorstep, although you don't believe it to be me despite thinking to the contrary in every other regard of my character."

"I know," Will agreed, and he nodded. "I thought about that."

"You said that you wanted nothing to do with me."

"I thought about that, too."

Hannibal's lips curled, cruel and violently unkind as he looked Will over with a sneer. "Then what could you have possibly conjured in that vast imagination that would suppose I'd react in any way favorable to you coming to me today?"

Hannibal Lecter had visited Will Graham a lot during his imprisonment. To say that the visitor's log for a year or so held his name once a page or so would be accurate, and to say that he still persistently visited periodically later on would also be accurate. He'd stone-walled him, Jared the voice in his head forcing him to be strong. Silence was the best weapon against the Chesapeake Ripper. It was a mind game, Will knew, and he'd nearly broken under the pressure of Hannibal's voice pervading his walls, sinking into the stone surrounding him and whispering late into the night when the lights when out and all of the visitors were gone.

It taught Will a lot about Hannibal, and one thing was certain:

"I thought you'd be curious," he said honestly, and he set the letter down on the coffee table. "All you know is to hunger and to satiate. Seemed right up your alley."

He left Hannibal in the parlor, but he couldn't quite claim that he left him entirely behind. He could feel his eyes, like hooks digging at the back of his head the entire way home. The poor

young woman from the dorm room lay limp and unresponsive in the seat beside him, mirrors hiding the space where her eyes used to be.

-

Just Paperwork.

That's what the text read, but Will wasn't sure if he bought it. He'd make a forceful exit if it turned out not to be the case, so after class he headed over and met Jack at the FBI headquarters on a drizzly spring morning. He'd dreamt of Jael's nail fine-tipped as it dragged its desires over his skin, creating. He dreamt of the strangle marks on the woman's neck, dark and mottled purple against her otherwise fair skin. They matched the ones he'd gotten once upon a time from Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

He thought about reaching out to Alana, or maybe even Beverly, but there was the concern they'd ask if he was going to go to a doctor or something.

Next time, he'd punch Jack in the jaw, be damned the consequences.

The room he sat in to fill out the paperwork for his being on the crime scene was much like the one he'd once been imprisoned in when Jack had first branded him a killer. He scribbled in an offhand way, ignoring the agent he recognized painfully from before: Agent Price. The looping metal bracket was still fixed to the center of the table, as though he could be cuffed to it at any moment. His leg bounced, and his grip on the pen made grooves of his statement.

"I want to apologize," Price said, and the silence had lasted all of five minutes.

Will paused in his writing and frowned. "Don't be."

The clock ticked hard on the wall, each second digging another groove into his skull. Time in rooms like this crawled, and his leg bounced a tic harder.

"I could have researched deeper, but--"

"He outsmarts people," Will cut in, smooth and automatic. The perfect, square shape of the room was starting to itch. He wrote a little faster. The back of his throat still tasted like the blood that clogged the air of the dorm room. "He wanted you all to be blind, therefore you were blind."

"If it's who you think it is, though, why would he be so bold as to let you see?" he wondered, and curiously his voice dropped a level, just quiet enough that Will weirdly and suddenly felt the need to be quiet, too.

"...He wants to see what I will do," Will replied.

"But why?" Price pressed, and his genuine confusion made Will wonder just how in the world Jack was ever going to catch the Chesapeake Ripper without him.

"Because he wants to be my friend."

He filled out the rest of the paperwork in silence, and he managed to make it to the mens' room before the cold sweat that'd made his shirt cling to his back caused him to dry heave. The halls had turned this way, then that, and he grabbed the sink tight to ground himself in the moment, in reality. His vision swam, and his muscles were fast becoming rubber.

"N-no, no..." but it's happening, and the tremors worked their way down, from his skull to his toes. He felt first cold, then hot all over, and he swore he felt the claustrophobic pressure of the prison cell around him, cloying and dank. Four perfect walls. Square. Smaller than he'd thought. Clocks ticked slower, there.

"I didn't...I didn't kill him," Will cried out in his sleep.

"Last warning, Graham. If you don't shut your trap I'll strap it shut," the orderly warned, and their baton smacked and reverberated against the iron cells.

"I didn't..." he clenched his teeth and grabbed his ears, hunkering onto the bathroom floor. All he could see was the stone floor of his cell. The floor got damp when it rained too hard. Water seeped through the stones, and he was going to die in here, wasn't he? He was going to die before he made Hannibal pay for what he'd done?

That's what you do, isn't it? Understand?

The swathes of blood the Avid Fan carved across the bedroom smears the walls of his cell. He blinked, and the mirror in front of his sink lay in pieces, shattered across his floor.

"Will?"

He heard it, but not right away. It took some time to process, like someone shouting from the other end of a distant hall through muffled hands. He looked up from the cement floor and was surprised to find Hannibal on the inside of his cell, head tilted in bemused surprise.

He wanted to be afraid, or angry at the inexplicable intrusion, but he couldn't get over the fear, the fear that he'd killed them, he'd killed them, he'd killed them... "How did you get in?" he rasped, staring at his shoe.

Hannibal gestured. "Through the door."

"They unlocked it?" He trembled from the prickling heat on his skin, branding. Just breathing was the key, just breathing...

"Did you think it locked?" he asked amused. At Will's expression, though, he paused, and with careful consideration he hitched his pant legs and hunkered down just in front of him. His expression gentled ever-so-slightly, and Will hated it yet felt some shame in the way it managed to calm him. "Is it always locked?"

"Isn't every cage?"

"And just what cage have you conjured in that fortress of yours?"

Will couldn't quite drag his eyes past the curve of his lip. He looked back to the damp cement and trembled. "Don't you recognize it? It's the one you crafted for me."

Hannibal followed his gaze and nodded, something registering in his eyes. "The prison."

"Can't you see it?"

Hannibal took his hands and didn't let go despite Will trying to jerk away. His expression remained genteel, and he spared the cell door a backward glance. He hadn't, of course, locked it when he entered.

"I believe you're experiencing a flashback," he said gently, looking back to Will. "What were you doing before you came here?"

"I didn't kill them," Will said, and he could feel the nightmares dancing behind his eyelids. Hands dipped in blood, and hadn't Will been the one to throw Marissa Schurr onto those antlers after all? Hadn't Will been the one to rip Cassie Boyle's lungs from her chest? "I didn't..."

"Who, Will?"

"Any of them," he said, agonized, and he dragged in a breath that caught halfway. "I didn't kill...I didn't kill them, can't you see that?" he asked, and he looked to Hannibal's eyes, shaking. "Can't you see that? He thinks I can see him, but I can't because I didn't kill those people, I didn't see those things like he did."

"That's it," the orderly snapped, and there was the scraping, tell-tale catch of the keys turning in the tumblers. "I've had enough of this shit."

"Will," Hannibal murmured, and he let go of his hands to grasp his face, cradling it much like Peter Bernadone had cupped the crippled cardinal. "Look at me, Will."

"I don't want to see," he begged into the space between them, terrified.

"You're having a flashback," Hannibal murmured, undeterred. "I want you to look at me, and I want you to breathe."

His breath caught the first time, and even the fourth. His skin prickled, cold, as he was handcuffed and hauled off of the cot, and it was only Hannibal holding his face so still that kept him from bolting, from running because he had an out, he had an out, he had an out...he couldn't keep the stare that burned him, but eyes fell to lips that parted with each even, slow breath. His mouth parted to mimic it, and by the twelfth breath he managed a full one, held it long enough to make it burn.

"Yes, like that. Breathe with me."

Another breath, this one slower and calmer. His heart rate still pitched, but the cold sweat had stopped prickling over his back. Will blinked, and the blur behind Hannibal looked less like bars, less like the wet stone that wept in the rain. "How did you get in here?" he asked, confused.

"Clever boy, tell me how," Hannibal replied. "Look around and tell me how."

It wasn't until he could see the bathroom tile clearly that he stood with a lurch, stomach back flipping into his kidneys. Hannibal's fingerprints burned where they'd dug into his skin, and he rubbed his mouth where he dare lay such treacherous, vulnerable secrets. That was how he got you, you see, the Chesapeake Ripper with all of his lies and careful planning. The more you trusted him with your secrets, the more easily he wove his web. He looked at the tiles and drummed his fingers into his hips. He'd fucked up. It wasn't his fault, but he'd fucked up.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked--demanded.

Hannibal stood carefully and brushed the dirt off of his trousers lazily. If he minded the bathroom setting, it didn't show on his face. "Alana and I came to speak with Agent Crawford about you."

The back of Will's neck grew hot, thinking of the two of them coming together to speak on his behalf. "About me?"

Hannibal tilted his head. "Yes."

"Have fun with that, then," he said, and he turned on his heel to flee the horrific scene of his vulnerability.

Out in the hall, Alana Bloom caught him not fifteen steps from the bathroom, and Will couldn't stop his vitriol in the wake of his embarrassment. "Why are you here?" he snapped, exasperated. The shock of Hannibal's touch, caring and grounding in the midst of his episode, and here she was to run off and tattle on Will to Jack Crawford.

His emotion seemed to surprise her. Her eyes widened, briefly, and she looked behind him where the bathroom door latched once more as Hannibal followed him out. "We came to tell Jack Crawford to leave you the hell alone," she said slowly. He could see the gears turning in her mind.

"Worried about me?" he asked--not quiet kind.

Hannibal circled him to join Alana's side. "We saw the news," he explained, expression shifting to something much like concern. "When we saw Jack Crawford herding you to the crime scene, we knew you wouldn't have done that willingly. You all but ran from those dorm rooms."

His grave, fixed expression said what words didn't: *Jack Crawford triggered your PTSD, and we saw it on the news.*

Will stared at him for a painfully blank moment. "You came to protest on my behalf," he reiterated.

"Yes."

"We want you to be able to heal," Alana chimed in. "I'm sorry he pressured you into having to experience something so traumatizing again. That's not something you should have felt

compelled to do, even if it helped the investigation."

Will processed that for a painfully rich moment where he felt like both the key to the lock and yet also just another cog in the moving piece. He thought of the girl's arms splayed wide, open in surrender to her fate. Sisera's arms lay curled close, pillowed beneath his head in sweet ignorance.

"I told him to leave me alone after this," he said, and he looked away from them. Jared paced the halls and made a pointed gesture towards the exit.

"Do you need company? Do you need--"

"I need to get to class before I'm late," he said, and he looked back to them, a couple as charming as one on a magazine cover, all gloss and chic finish. He wanted to compliment them on it; knew Alana wouldn't find it funny. "This is just a speedbump. My life these past years have been nothing more than one long speedbump."

There was also the matter of Hannibal not mentioning Will visiting his house once again directly afterwards, but that was a different matter.

"I don't think it's entirely healthy to--"

"Thanks, Dr. Bloom, but I really must get going," Will drawled, and he smiled at the two of them, all teeth and more feral than friendly. "You two enjoy your afternoon, now."

Chapter End Notes

Happy kick off to the holidays! I was out of town for much of last week, and after a hangover Sunday that left me realizing I'm too old for this shit, here we are...

A major thanks to all of you for supporting my work! I really enjoy and appreciate everything you've done to encourage me and keep me plodding on. There may be some errors, as it was posted in a haste...I will have this posted over on Tumblr tonight, but lunch breaks make for limited abilities. :)

I hope you enjoy! Gotta love some Hannibal being Hannibal. :)

Method Acting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7: Method Acting

There was a letter on his kitchen table when he got home from school the next day. He wondered if that was going to be the difference between his two killers, that one supposed them to be on close enough terms for him to waltz through the door while the other still held the decency to knock.

Should the bodies begin to stack, there was the unsettling afterthought that one day, his Avid Fan would start waltzing in, too.

Dear Will,

Another killer? Should I be jealous, I wonder, or do you crave only the undoing of my mind, my blend of violent psychosis. When you dream, are you Jael, or are you Sisera?

Yours,

-Chesapeake Ripper

He made dinner early and turned the thought over and over. That is what the Ripper loved about him, wasn't it? How he both felt like the hammer and the nail? How he felt as though the weight of his violence would hit, and be damned the consequences of what came of it when it landed? Was he Jael, or was he Sisera?

Jealous. The Chesapeake Ripper wanted to know if he should be jealous.

Avid Fans tended to love with fists clenched so tight they broke it. Will wondered if he'd wake up with a knife to his throat like that girl did. Would he make mirrors of Will's eyes, too? What had he wanted to show Will in the violence of her demise?

Was his Avid Fan Sisera, or were they trying desperately to be Jael?

It had to be hard for someone like the Chesapeake Ripper to feign concern, but it was even harder for Will to realize that the person capable of pulling him from his traumas was the very one who put him there. Hannibal had held his hands so carefully, tended the wounded wing.

Alana's concern at the FBI was the sticky feel of winter too cold for skin. Fingers frozen while scraping ice off of a car. He wondered what they said to Jack and if it'd hit home the way it should. Clearly the things that'd happened to him at the hands of the FBI's justice weren't enough to deter Jack from pushing again. Clearly Will hadn't learned enough from his

first lesson that he felt the need to let himself be pushed. Bitterness was a Jack Crawford-shaped coffee stain at the bottom of his mug that he scrubbed ruthlessly when washing dishes, the letter just out of reach of the soapy water.

Will sometimes hated the moments where he reveled in the Chesapeake Ripper's cleverness, those awful moments when admiration would settle in despite everything he knew to be true. He figured those thoughts only came with the rise of acid that bubbled whenever Jack's name sat in his skull too long. First, a thought for Jack Crawford's ruthlessness; second, a thought for the Chesapeake Ripper and how he could dance so carefully out of reach. Third, a thought for Jack Crawford's desperation; fourth, a thought for the Chesapeake Ripper's 'mercy'. Of course he could outsmart Jack Crawford. Of course he'd only ever be caught if Will managed to trick him.

However short lived, it was dangerous to think kindly of the man that secretly fed him people for fun. For curiosity. For kicks.

Much like his time in the prison, free time was spent walking--thankfully, outside of prison he was able to extend that walk into the forest, the place where the hushing of the leaves muffled his thoughts among the underbrush that'd sat mulching beneath the snow all winter long. He may not be able to expunge Hannibal Lecter from his mind, but he could walk him out enough to focus and plan against him.

Hannibal didn't mention the letter written by his Avid Fan in front of Alana. That meant the Chesapeake Ripper had a marvelous idea.

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Will Graham sat in the back of the classroom in photography and did his best to ignore the staring. He was that Will Graham now, they were thinking, and how the whole fucking campus would know by the end of it! The victim's name was plastered everywhere, from the Tri-Delta lawn to the cafeteria just on the edge of the student buildings. Kayla Idlett. He saw her face on t-shirts and signs, and he wondered what they'd think if he showed them the image imprinted on his eyelids of how she'd looked after the killer was through with her.

"It must be difficult, being that Will Graham," Francis said, sitting down beside him. He didn't stare, but instead looked across the room and fixed his eyes to the board.

Will shifted, not sure if he should get up and move. "I guess."

"You must know the murder of that painter nearby was done by the Chesapeake Ripper, then, if *Jael and Sisera* is your favorite art piece as of late," he continued, and he leaned in conspiratorially to whisper it.

Will tensed, but he wasn't sure if it was discomfort or surprise that caught him so off guard. Francis didn't seem to care who he was or that his path was cobbled from the bones of a serial killer's victims. It was a little refreshing, if he was being honest. Perceptive, but intrusive. He wondered what dragon lurked in his seat-mate's life. He wondered if he was the victim about to be swallowed or the monster with the fangs.

"I have my thoughts," he said at last.

"And you think he'd bear your screams well."

Will glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "I think he already has, don't you?"

"He must be greedy if he's already killed another on campus," Francis said, voice lowering as the teacher walked in. Will opened his binder and flipped through a few papers for his last assignment. "I feel sorry for the girl. Kayla Idlett."

Will gritted his teeth, and he swallowed the smell of fresh death. He wasn't sure, in reality, if it was a smell that could ever be forgotten. Sometimes in the middle of the night, he woke and inhaled the memory of how the air had tasted just after he'd shot Garrett Jacob Hobbs: pine needles and gun powder and copper.

"That wasn't him," he said, raising his hand when it was called during roll call. Then, "that...that was a different killer. One more violent, more..."

"He was an animal," Jared said, puzzled. He sat on the desk and swung his legs back and forth. He couldn't quite come to terms with how brutal the killer's love had been.

"Powerful?" Francis guessed, studying Will's face.

"Animalistic," Will clarified, and he couldn't quite meet his gaze. "But a cunning one. No animal would delight so much in her pain. This one did."

Francis looked like he had a profound thought to that, hazel-brown eyes focused and gravely somber, but the teacher was passing out a pop quiz and the collective groans made it sound as though it was going to take awhile.

Which suited Will just fine, in truth. He didn't want to think about her anyway.

-

Molly Foster, as promised, called.

"Hi," she said warmly, and Will was surprised at just how comforting the sound was. Like a sweater just out of the dryer on a cold day.

He lay back on the bed in the living room and smiled a little, accepting Winston's curious sniffing and demanding nudges. "HI."

He wanted to ask if she'd looked him up yet. It lay poised on the tip of his tongue. His breath had gotten stuck, though, somewhere in his ribs. A balloon that trembled and whacked frantically as he gulped in another one. Alana and Hannibal saw him on the news. That meant everyone had witnessed him on the news.

"I heard about...about the girl. I'm so sorry, Will," she said, and he rubbed his mouth. Had the news taken a delight in showing him all but run to the bathrooms to puke? Had Freddie Lounds been lurking among the rabble?

"It's okay," he said. Then, "it's not, I mean, but...thank you."

"Have you eaten?"

He smiled. "Not yet."

"Okay," she said, and she seemed to take a deep breath. "Then I'd like to say that out of everything I researched, not once did I find a single newspaper apologizing for the words they published when you were first arrested," she said, and a needle pricked the balloon in his lungs. He let out a gasp of laughter, and she laughed a little, too. "I mean it! No, I'm sorry..."

"It's okay," he assured her, gulping in another breath of air. "It's okay."

"I just thought that, after the fourth or fifth thing I read. No one apologized. There were so many things I read...so many things they said, and no one apologized to you, Will Graham."

He was prevented from another response by Winston stepping into his gut to get a better angle for sniffing Will's jaw. Now that she'd said something, and not only was it a something it was a good something, his blood was beginning to wake, to race.

"I'm sorry," he said when he finally got his breath and sat up, shoving the dog off of him with a grunt. "The dog-"

"No, I mean someone should be apologizing to you, jeez! Will--"

"--jumped on me and I couldn't breathe for a second--"

"--what?"

Will paused. "...What?"

There was another pause, then they both began to laugh, and it seemed to break something open because his skin was warm and his stomach was flooded with butterflies, frantic with delight. He could breathe, Molly didn't believe a word the news said about him, and he began to pace the length of the house, listening to her analyze each spread and how she ranked their skill of writing based on how many of them used the phrase, *"reign of terror"*.

After, he lay in a dizzy spell of pleasure, and he supposed that there may be a lot of things standing in the way of his happiness at the moment, but Molly Foster sure as hell wasn't one of them.

-

Hannibal knocked on his front door early the next morning, while Will was finishing up breakfast. Winston barked that time, tail wagging with an eagerness Will didn't like. So much for security, should a killer come knocking. He wondered what it was the Chesapeake Ripper did to appease his dog so that he could sneak in and out at will and leave notes all he liked.

"You can tell Alana I don't need someone to check on me," he said irritably, standing in the doorway. He thought of Hannibal's hands cupping his, and the scowl darkened.

"Alana didn't send me," Hannibal said. He stood a polite distance away, tweed suit earth-toned and gentle on his eyes. In the sunrise, they seemed almost tawny.

Will didn't buy it for a second. "Just being a good Samaritan?"

"Trying to be." A flicker of a smile, first suggested then gone; then, "not going to let me in, Will?"

"Not inclined to."

Hannibal didn't seem to mind saying what he had to say on the doorstep. He tucked his hands behind his back and prepared himself for a long wait. "I first wanted to make sure you were alright."

Will didn't want to talk about that with anyone, let alone someone like Hannibal. "I'm fine."

"We are both adults, Will, you don't have to pretend."

"You weren't--"

"You should have never been escorted to that crime scene," he cut Will off smoothly, calmly. "Any other person of interest would have been placed under protective custody, not waltzed into a violent crime scene where they were forced to analyze it. Considering the place of your mindset at the time, it was a poorly made decision on his part. He took advantage of you."

"You didn't mind showing me violent crime scenes," Will said, and he hated how the words came out so soft. Stifled, a suggestion of a memory. "You even stole them off of Dr. Du Maurier's desk so that I could see."

Hannibal stared at him, and despite everything to come Will would turn over that expression longer than anything else. It both haunted him and marked him, and it left his palms hot. "If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't have."

Will nodded sagely. "Sure."

"I told you once that I would apologize to you sparingly so that I didn't sully the word from overuse. Do you remember?"

Will remembered, although the memory of it was bitter, like biting into an acorn. The meat of it was chalky and dry on his teeth. "Yeah."

"I want to apologize for how I behaved when you came to my home." A beat. "The second time," he amended. "I should have realized something was wrong. You'd just come from that crime scene, and I was no comfort. I should have recognized the signs, as obvious as they were. You were clearly in shock and could meet my eyes maybe once our entire encounter before you left. You were shaken, and in your moment of weakness I was rude."

Will had been prepared for a lot of scenarios; humility wasn't one of them. He was still sore over how out of anyone in the world to find him like that, quivering on the bathroom floor of the FBI and hallucinating, it was Hannibal-fucking-Lecter, but he didn't imagine Hannibal

would be apologizing over something afterwards. He resented it, on some level. He craved it, on an even darker level.

"When I saw you on the news, I realized that you'd done what you always did: Jack cornered you, used you, and then you came to piece yourself back together with me."

He shook his head, the words sinking in and sticking in a way that felt all too subconscious and out of his control. That he'd dare suggest-- "That wasn't...that's not--"

"I went to you for four years to try and talk to you, but even when you finally come around to speaking in return, I lashed out at you."

Will found he couldn't unhinge his jaw to speak, his mind scrabbling on the smooth rock wall he'd come against at this...whatever the hell this was. He felt the unease of karma, Hannibal using his own tactic of abrupt and unwelcome appearances, and it took a long time for him to find the words. Hannibal wanted him disarmed, and he had to admit to feeling a tad fucking disarmed.

He felt the challenge in the air: *your move.*

"...Maybe you should come in after all," he said heavily, looking out over the field. As if he had neighbors that would potentially overhear them. Still, it would give him a moment to collect himself, try and stomp out the image he had of Hannibal holding his hands on the pristine floors of the FBI to reassure him that what he was seeing most certainly wasn't real.

Clever boy.

Hannibal followed him in, and he greeted Winston with a level of affection that Will took personally.

"Coffee?"

"Please."

He took his time setting the ingredients on the table for him. By the time Will sat down across from the Chesapeake Ripper, he'd already gleaned over everything in the house that his place at the table could give him. He tried to catch Will's eye, failed, and accepted a spoon to stir in the cream.

"You tried to come to someone that would understand what a stalker looks like," he said when Will was settled.

"I can recognize the feeling of it in his writing," Will agreed. He palmed the hot cup and reveled in the burn of it.

"This person may mean to harm you, then."

Will nodded slowly, having come to terms with that somewhere between a mostly sleepless night and an oil change in the middle of work. He blinked, and the girl truly had no time to

fight back, did she? Not with how brutally his Avid Fan had taken her. "Things like this always escalate."

"You didn't show the note to Jack Crawford."

He shook his head. "He'd lock me up again."

Hannibal set down his spoon and tilted his head. "You don't think he'd protect you?"

"Safe house, jail cell...they all have locks."

"Is that all you've ever wanted?" Hannibal wondered. "Freedom?"

The grounds were rough in the cup, and Will couldn't wait for Hannibal to have to suffer it. His lip twitched. "Freedom from a lot of things."

"Freedom comes at a price we often don't see until they've already totaled the bill," Hannibal said solemnly. "In a way, your incarceration freed you from encephalitis."

"And my incarceration saved you from the trouble of the law," Will shot back.

"Your release freed you from the confines of false-accusations."

"You've been skipping that bill for some time, haven't you?" Will asked coldly. "The false-accusations, I mean."

"We all do for as long as we're able."

Will took a scalding gulp of coffee and scowled at the heat mark Hannibal's cup had made on the table. "Why the hell are you here, Hannibal?" It was a loaded question. He opened his mouth to reply, and Will pressed, "does Alana even know you're here?"

Hannibal's long pause was answer enough. Will glanced up to his eyes, then to his mouth set in a line of determination, something unreadable and untouchable. "I think that you should leave."

"Despite your thoughts to the contrary, I care about your well-being, Will," he said, unflinching. "If I could show you my innocence, I would lay it on a silver platter. You may always see me as the monster that destroyed your life, but I will always see you as a friend, and by your own admission that friend is in trouble."

"By your own admission, we're not friends," Will replied.

We are far more than friends, Will.

It's a tricky thing, Will supposed, walking a tight rope. There was a certain finesse that he had to give Hannibal credit for: The Chesapeake Ripper would always be a mask donned that he could be irresistibly cruel behind, and no matter the cruelty there would always be an art reflected that Will traced over with reverent fingers in the aftermath. When he fancied himself in love, he draped a woman like the Birth of Venus. When he needed Will to

understand Garrett Jacob Hobbs' love for his daughter, he threw a girl onto a a stag's head and cut her lungs from her still-fighting body.

Hannibal, though, had had to traverse such complex feelings he had for Will in the moment, and while he was careful never to tell Will they were in a relationship, there were odd, sporadic and possessive moments where he seemed particularly adamant that Will understand just how he regarded him. He thought of the way Hannibal had once pressed him to the pillar in his office, wrists clasped tight in possessive hands, and how the night he finished his composition on the harpsichord was the same night he'd pried open an oyster shell to place a woman lovingly inside of it.

Sometimes, even Hannibal Lecter had the human struggle of emotion.

"I have always had...irreconcilable feelings about you," Hannibal said, and at last there was some flicker of emotion that made his mask crack. Will hated that he could see it. "We never got the chance to unravel that."

"Never will."

Hannibal set his cup down, rough on the table and meant to grab attention. Will's eyes snapped up to meet his, his anger chafing and growing with each uncomfortable statement laid on the particle-board-constructed piece of shit between them that was sooner or later going to give from the weight of it. He set his own cup down before he sloshed it on the bastard.

Will regretted letting him in. He'd be airing the house out for hours.

"Can you honestly say that you don't also have irreconcilable feelings for me, Will?" Hannibal demanded, sharp. His eyes, once so captivating--until they decided to be cold--flashed with something wicked and vibrant, tempting. "You came to my home and held a gun to me, yet in your moments of weakness you then turn and come to me for help."

"I don't--"

"Where is your *reckoning*," he breathed, leaning in. "This brimstone and fire you promised to bring to me."

"Maybe I reconciled with that!" Will snapped. He clenched and unclenched his hands, debated wrapping them around his neck.

Hannibal tilted his head, raptor-sharp and knowing. "You whose barriers could have only grown worse the longer you were locked away without the tools to help yourself, you're telling me you've let go of the reckoning that made a passion burn hot in your voice as you disavowed your lover?"

Hannibal told me that the two of you were lovers.

"You used me for the chance to further your education opportunities," Will said, and it was a distinctly forced calm. "The moment I saw the motivation behind your every move, it was

easy to unravel the man behind the mask."

His eyes flickered, then, cold frosted with something close to a detached violence. Will held his breath, and in that brief moment he felt his life weighed, balanced. Sometimes, in the throes of his civility, it was easy to forget that Hannibal Lecter was a violent murderer. "You so easily see me, Will?" he asked, quiet. "You understand my turn of mind?"

Disrupt, otherwise he's going to know he's shaken you.

"What do you want, Hannibal!?" Will demanded, and he stood quickly, the burst of energy there and gone, leaving him empty in the aftermath and only half-ashamed. He gripped the table tight, as though poised to flip it, and after a breath he looked down and let out a rough, slow exhale. "Why are you here?" he pressed. "Really. Stop...stop bull-shitting me."

S-stop lying to me!

Hannibal didn't rise to the bait of Will's explosion. He seemed to sense just how tentatively he held Will's patience, as wavering as his grasp on sleep. "You didn't go to Jack Crawford, and I didn't tell Alana Bloom. You're afraid this person is close, then, someone that would know if you sought help from the FBI."

"I don't know, yet."

"I want to help you."

Will scoffed and stepped back from the table, tucking his hands into his pockets. "What's your price?"

Hannibal didn't bull shit him, and for that Will was grateful. "Quid pro quo: I help you find this Avid Fan, and you help me find the Chesapeake Ripper."

Surprise and dark humor tasted much like a static shock on the tongue. Will wondered how long he'd pressed his hands into a puddle of Charlie's blood before he'd come to and realized just what he'd done while in an unconscious state. Just what the Chesapeake Ripper had done to him.

"Why do you want to find the Chesapeake Ripper?" Will asked, and he couldn't help the small laugh that bubbled up. It lodged in his voice and made his tone gravel.

Hannibal was unflappable. "Because if we find him, you will finally believe me when I say that everything I've done has been what I thought was best for you."

Will regarded him evenly for a moment, but he couldn't quite keep his gaze. Not when it reeked of a blood-drenched dorm room and his Avid Fan's letter of offering. A pig to the slaughter.

Likely he'd have borrowed the Chesapeake Ripper's stag head to gut her on.

"The Chesapeake Ripper is in love with me," he said, quiet. "At least; he used to be."

Hannibal's expression didn't change. "What makes you think that?"

"He once took a woman and strung her up using fishing line and a dash of ingenuity," Will replied, and he took great delight in analyzing every tense angle of the man before him. "Her hair long enough to lay over her naked, exposed body, and he made her like Venus, and his love was born.

"I'd told that to Agent Crawford at the time, but...I didn't realize until I was framed that I was the tagline of the killer's serenade. Signed, C.R., to my dearest Will."

Hannibal didn't blink. "How did it make you feel, realizing that?"

Will grinned. "I didn't believe it at first. For a long time, I...I thought it was an act. A sensitive psychopath? One that yearns but still makes their machinations?" He scoffed and cupped his jaw in his hand. "Now...it's like...like he desperately wants to be found." Will looked out of the window to the backyard, where the path led to the river. His thoughts were racing, leaping; electric shocks of ideas that spread with each tantalizing door opened. "He just wants it to be by the right person."

"And do you think we're the right ones to find him?" Hannibal asked.

"Oh, I think he'd be delighted."

"Then...let me help you, Will Graham," he said, and those words stayed with Will long after; they stayed with him as he went to work and managed to get a twenty dollar tip for being the guy to survive the Chesapeake Ripper. They stayed with him through class, where he had to edit the shadowing done on a badly taken photo for an assignment. They stayed with him at dinner, they stayed with him as he played fetch with Winston, and they stayed with him as he tucked himself in for bed.

"Let me help you" was much akin to saying 'let me keep your secrets'. And if Hannibal Lecter was asking to keep his secrets, that meant he'd finally decided to take the bait.

Will didn't care allow himself to worry yet over how rough the bite.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Friday the 13th!! A fun day. I know it's supposed to be "unlucky", but I don't see it that way. I got to take a half day, and here we are! Thank you all so very much for the lovely words and insightful comments on Hannibal and Will...I think I have this bad habit of just putting Will in the worst scenarios he could image and then seeing what happens. >:)

May all of your holidays be going well...and as always, I hope you enjoyed. :)

To Take a Dagger and Drown Yourself

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8: To Take a Dagger and Drown Yourself

He sat by the river, catching and releasing. Catching and releasing. The windows and doors were wide open to the house, each and every one. Even the one to the bedroom he'd once slept in. Walking through it, he found Jared Freeman lounging where he once haunted Will's worst nightmares until Hannibal took over with his Ravenstag dripping blood.

"You didn't seem to mind him walking through this place," he said, only half-accusing.

"I wasn't going to interrupt your breakfast date." Jared replied, snide. And absentmindedly, like he's had to say this before, *"He's going to eat you alive if you're not careful."*

"Not if I eat him first," Will had said coldly.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs was already walking towards the river. Will knew his thoughts on the matter.

He stepped over the place where he'd once dragged his nails into the wood. Where Hobbs once strangled him. Opening the window rather than slamming it shut felt oddly good. Then he gathered his fishing supplies and went out to the river where a late night rain had made the water rise high and fast.

One fish swallowed the hook, though, and it was only then that Will seemed to snap out of the stream of thought that carried him over and over and over that conversation again, turning it this way and that. He kept stumbling on that look Hannibal had given him, how in that moment he was the Chesapeake Ripper and Will was his prey. He wondered with a fine-toothed comb over the curl of his smile, how he'd seemed so ready, in that moment, to grab Will and hurt him in whatever way came to mind when their skin met--or maybe fuck him?

Do you see me so easily, Will?

Hobbs had to run to the forest to find his solace and peace. So did Will.

Only the hook was caught, and Will knew there was no way to salvage it. He cut the line and did a brief prayer that no game warden was out to grab him. He should probably do something about getting that permit.

Stone in hand is how he put the fish to its grave, and rather than letting the guts run downstream for another to eat later, for some odd reason Will found himself digging a small place for entrails. Slick and cold they slid from his hands to their grave, and he imagined the hook inside the belly and how that's truly how all good hooks should sink: deep.

Like Hannibal, Will's own tightrope was precarious, too. To bait a killer, one must find their turn of mind, their motive. One had to delve deep into their madness, make it their bedmate and friend without making it their own. In doing so, he found himself turning over the thought of his smile, how he'd only gotten angry when Will questioned his motives in their entirety.

The game master, one that didn't like their rules being questioned. The manipulator, the one that took him from friend to lover in the span of only a few choice words.

The windows would likely stay open all night if the temperature stayed mellow. Probably wouldn't, but he'd take the bite if it meant the feel of Hannibal would fade from his house. He'd scrubbed the table long after the bastard had left. He still felt his eyes on the walls, watching.

After he buried the fish, he didn't continue his catch-and-release. He sat on the rock by the river awhile, thinking on a time when he hadn't had to fish alone.

He texted Beverly once he got back to the house, thumb pressed thoughtfully to his bottom lip as he thought on the way Hannibal had held his hands, hunkered together and alone on the floor of the FBI bathroom:

He's taken the bait.

-

Once upon a time, there was a terrible journalist that did everything in their power to make Will Graham look like a psychopath among the general population of the internet. For quite some time, she did a marvelous job at it, and her quick thinking at his trial--leaping over the barrier to get a close-up of his face after the verdict was read before managing to elude the deputies and disappearing down a questionable alley--led to a newspaper agency by the name of Sunbelt Times picking her up and giving her a small spread about halfway in. It wasn't glamorous, but it paid better than online subscribers. Better than having to work with ad companies for space on her blog between the words her readers needed to hear. Better than going hungry during months where the story didn't bite back.

Sometimes, though, when sitting in the office and getting ragged on by her boss, she wondered...

Investigative journalism, she'd called it, when she reached out to Beverly Katz over her more-than-impressive thesis and offered a few tantalizing scoops of her own on the matter.

Freddie sat across from Will now with a latte in one hand and pen in the other, the cap tap-tap-tapping on her notebook. Her blue eyes still glittered, her nose turned to the scent of the story in the air. Not much had changed for Freddie in four years; even her fashion sense had shifted only marginally towards less abrasive pattern blends.

Beside her, boots crossed at the ankles and arms folded across her chest, Beverly struck a contrast to the woman beside her. It was clear that they were not friends, nor would they ever be. Even their shoulders turned slightly from one another, offended at the thought of

touching. Their trio was a precarious one at that, and Will wondered if by the end of it all it wouldn't fall in on itself from the weight of all the unresolved anger.

Across from them, Will wasn't much for finding a way to assuage that. If he had it his way, Freddie Lounds wouldn't be there, either. Fingers fidgeted restlessly with the items that'd been on the table by their waitress. The booth at the back of the diner was always forgotten.

"I don't know what you expect me to say," Freddie said, speaking slowly, like to a child.

"'I don't get it, but I'll do it anyway?'" Will suggested.

"If I don't tell my boss why I'm doing that, he may not let it hit print."

"So have a backup if he doesn't?"

Freddie stared at him, then looked to Beverly beside her who was using a stirring stick for her untouched coffee to push her cuticles back. "And what do you have to think about it?" she asked, sniffing delicately.

Beverly had stayed quiet most of the conversation. She'd listened to Will go over his conversation with Hannibal, how Hannibal wanted to help Will once again. A secret for the two of them, only this time Will wasn't letting it stay that way. It was a dangerous game, but if Will had someone on the outside, he didn't have to fall into the madness and drown this time, did he? He had a plan, and much like the plans they'd hatched within the walls of the BSHCI, it had as much solid footing as it had every capacity to wash him down the river.

She glanced up, eyebrow quirked, then looked to Will's hands mindlessly organizing the sugar packets. "What, him trying to piss off the Chesapeake Ripper or him trying to make the guy so mad he kills the Tooth Fairy?"

"Is that what they're calling him?" Freddie asked, scrambling from her slouched position at the whisper of news. Beverly had her undivided attention.

Beverly's lip twitched. "Couple papers out west are."

"Why?" Will asked, not looking up from the sugar packets. Avid Fan sounded worse in his head than the Tooth Fairy did. He hadn't told them about that. He couldn't quite say why he didn't. The letter had singed his jacket pocket into a perfect rectangle of guilt. If Beverly knew, she'd make him take it to Jack, likely; Freddie would want to write about it. It was better this way.

At that, she hesitated, glancing to Freddie. Freddie sighed, then exhaled noisily and laid her pen down. "Off the record," she promised, "but I'm using that name, though."

Beverly snorted. "Bite marks on the body. Messy ones. Ugly. We're checking dental records because the spread is so unique, and somehow some ass over in Washington got his hands on the information, and the Tooth Fairy was born."

"Bite marks?" Freddie asked, nose wrinkling. "You didn't tell us that part, Will."

"Large, ugly ones," Will murmured a moment too late, voice dropping. His head dropped with it. "Purple in the middle. He didn't think of them like that, though." He thought of Kayla Idlett's legacy being the first known woman to die by the hand of the Tooth Fairy. Children everywhere would grow to fear her, should their teeth fall out. Something in him threatened to laugh at it, if it wasn't so damn sad. "He's not going to like that name," he added, glancing up from the sugar packets, each arranged in alphabetical color order.

"I think you're taking a risk that pissing him off will make him do what you seem to think he'll do," said Beverly.

"I am," he agreed. "You're the writer, Freddie. He could come for you."

Freddie shrugged. "I was scared you were going to kill me."

Will looked back to Beverly genially. "She was scared I was going to kill her."

"I don't give a damn about that part--" Will noted the lack of apology for Freddie's life "--I just don't like the idea of you being the bait."

Will couldn't argue that. He looked out of the window rather than at the two of them that just didn't sit right together. They'd never be able to, just like he'd never be comfortable sitting across from someone who's job for as long as he'd known her was to make his life as difficult as possible. Sometimes, looking at Freddie Lounds, he felt flashes of a rage that'd burrowed deep and left bits of root to fester. The first time she'd sat across from him in the only room in the BSHCI, Jared Freeman never stopped pacing the square shape of it.

He remembered the things she'd said about him, too.

To catch the Ripper of all people, though...

"I think I'm the best bait, though," he said, watching a dog walker, then a kid with a backpack hiked high on their back. The wind discouraged umbrellas and pushed April showers down the back of their raincoat. "If he thinks the news is turning on him, and if he thinks I'm maybe turning on him in favor of the Tooth Fairy..."

"Jealousy's like a wildfire," Beverly replied wisely.

"Yeah, well, jealousy's the only real motivation I've picked up on," Will retorted. Sharper than intended. He frowned and rubbed at his mouth, propped his chin in hand and scowled at the dour rain. Winston would need a bath after running around in all the mud when he got home.

"I know," Beverly said evenly, unruffled. She uncrossed her legs and recrossed them the other way, getting comfortable.

"Jealousy..." Freddie said, and she began writing a bit, off to the side of the Tooth Fairy. "First Cassie Boyle, Amanda Lyon..." she scribbled them off, as though they hadn't repeated those names like a mantra. "Marissa Schurr, Nicholas Boyle, Charlie Yorkman, Abigail Hobbs, Martin Wood, and Blaine Ferguson."

Martin Wood must have been the body that grandly revealed Will's innocence. Blaine Ferguson the painter. Will tapped fingers idly on the table and watched a couple exchanging sweet nothings while waiting for the bus stop. He wanted to ask her about Martin Wood; he reasoned asking Beverly later was a better idea. Probably a more honest explanation.

"Cassie Boyle was a lesson...a foil to Garret Jacob Hobbs," he said, even softer than before. More to himself than them, and Freddie had to lean in to catch his turn of phrase. "Marissa Schurr...either to frame Nicholas Boyle for his sister, or as a way to better isolate me from any potential ties to stable, normal friendships. Amanda Lyon was his serenade, Nicholas Boyle his loose end." He tugged at a loose bit of skin on his lip with his teeth. He'd never let them think Abigail killed Nicholas Boyle. "I don't think," he said, looking away from the window, "I don't...really think he started killing in jealousy until he killed Charlie."

"Why?" Freddie asked, leaning in despite herself. The things she was going to write when this was all over...

...all part of their deal, of course.

"He had dinner at the house," said Will, and he quieted when the waitress set down Beverly's obligatory eggs she'd ordered a questionably long time ago. They couldn't kick them out if they kept ordering food. Once she left, he added absently, "he saw what Charlie could provide for an impressionable teen whose father was absent. He couldn't unveil his design if I had a stable place to fall to."

"And Abigail?" Beverly asked, grabbing his eye. She could tell when he was purposefully withdrawing, not quite wanting to connect to the memory enough to feel it. She tilted her head slightly, kindly. Beverly coudn't see all of his ugly insides, but whatever it was she saw she seemed to like. "That's why he took her, too?"

At that, he couldn't quite keep her gaze, and he looked down to the menu set under the linoleum top of their table. Maybe he'd order waffles next, something that could take time and would settle sweet in his sour stomach.

"Will--" Freddie said.

"I don't know why he killed her," he said, and he focused particularly hard on the waffles. It wasn't a lie, and that's why it was difficult. "I thought that at first, but...he once said that he had affection for her. He said he felt a connection to her, and that's what he wants, isn't it?"

"That's what he wants?" Beverly asked.

"Wouldn't it be lonely to be the only one in the world like you?" Will asked the waffles, and yup; marionberries on top, be damned the extra charge. Molly encouraged him to always try some new thing. "He said he saw something in her."

"Maybe she saw too much," Freddie guessed, writing furiously on her notepad. She was unconcerned with his thoughts on waffles.

Will jolted at that, though, and he looked at Beverly, something much like the tail end of a string teasing his thoughts, and he grabbed it. She looked back, head tilted. "Or," he said slowly, and he saw when Beverly's sharpened and she saw it, too. "Or, she said too much," he said, and he remembered those words she'd whispered to him in the dark and oppressive enclosure of antlers that still haunted him to this day.

Hannibal was the man on the phone.

"She told you something," said Beverly, and she grinned.

"She didn't keep his secret," Will agreed. "She said he was the one that called Garrett Jacob Hobbs the night he kidnapped me."

That stilled the sense of accomplishment, of discovery that made his blood begin to race. When the waitress came out from the back, Will ordered two helpings of waffles with marionberries. When she left Freddie said what they were all thinking.

"What's he going to do to you when he finds out about us, I wonder?"

Will looked at Freddie, focused on the corner of her cheekbone that dipped towards her temple. In the right light, her fair skin showed blue veins there. She wasn't as fragile as she looked, and god dammit neither was he. "We get ahead of that anger with your article, maybe curb it into something useful, and we'll kill two birds with one stone."

I want to show you something...

"You sure you're a step ahead of him?" Beverly asked dubiously. "There's nothing to say he's not already aware of all of us meeting like this."

Or Will's Avid Fan, for that matter, but...

"We won't know until the end," Will said, looking back out of the window. "The only thing we have in our favor really is that he won't know until the end, either."

The rain continued to drop a drizzly tune of grey against the windowpane. The marionberries were mushy but otherwise fantastic.

-

He was out on a coffee date with Molly when the second body on campus was found. It was 8:00, and he was catching her taking a 'self-care' morning. The cafe was tucked just out of reach of convenient parking, and Will took his time savoring the London Fog he was trying for the first time. His phone buzzed, and he ignored it.

"No way! So no matcha?"

"No."

"Chai?"

"I don't think so."

"Macchiato?"

"No."

"Mocha?"

"...I like this," he said by way of offering, lifting the cup up half-heartedly. It was the sort of cafe where they let you drink out of glass mugs. The kind cute girls liked to take dates at, where novelists wrote their finest short stories. He'd worn his best buffalo flannel and tried to style his hair in some modest fashion.

Molly wasn't deterred by his lack of experiencing much of the world she knew. If anything, it made her hungry to show him everything, from the dollar-black-and-whites they showed down the road where Will experienced silent film for the first time, to the all-you-can-eat-crab buffet where he got to see a man vomit across a table after eating far too much crab.

"Good for you. Next time you should get something different!"

He laughed, ignoring his phone as it buzzed again. "Sure."

Molly had been true to her word. After battling through Hannibal and work and school, she'd persistently called him again, hell-bent on another conversation. And by the end of it:

"I'd like to ask you on a date, Will."

Will covered his mouth to hide the smile that made him a prime target for Winston's persistent kisses. "Okay. I'd like to go on a date, Molly."

"Well, what do you think of cafes?" She gestured around, the ambient, sepia light casting her hair in shades of wheat.

He knew the right thing to say, only he couldn't quite bring himself to say it. He glanced to the study group in the corner that was discussing dildos at length, then, "I think I'd save money just bumbling through figuring out how to make it myself."

She grinned around the lip of her cup. "Likely you'd feel more comfortable making it in pajamas?"

"Yeah."

"Not in a public place with everyone rubbing shoulders in the early am?"

He grinned. "Right."

His phone buzzed once more, and he snatched it from the table, glancing down in annoyance to see Beverly's text notifications turn into a phone call that buzzed persistently at him.

"Sorry, I need to--"

"No, it's okay."

"Just a minute." He turned in his chair and answered, a weird sort of feeling settling into his gut. Beverly wouldn't be calling like this if everything was alright.

"Hey, where are you?" she asked when he picked up.

"Huh?"

"Where are you?" she repeated, firmer.

He glanced around. "One world cafe," he said, spying the logo on the shirts for sale on the wall. "What's wrong?"

"...Will, there's another body on campus. I think it'd be best if you went home, maybe kept a low profile."

Will looked over at Molly, then stood and wandered outside where the spring morning was torn between dumping rain or streaking overcast sunshine. "The Ripper, you think, or is it like the girl in the dorm room?"

He felt her grimace through the phone. "It's a political science professor, but it's similar to the victim from the other campus incident. Mirrors and all."

Will felt a stiff breeze and wondered if the hollow feeling in his bones meant one more solid blow would send him flying. He swallowed heavily and dreaded a letter potentially waiting at his door. What if his Avid Fan had only meant to send him one, an introduction to his massacre before the final blow? Why hadn't he told them about it at the diner? "I think...I need to talk to you."

"If it's about the Ripper, Will, it's--"

"It all ties together: the Ripper, this guy..." he swallowed past the knot tying tight in his throat. He started to mention the letter, then stopped himself, teeth biting down on his bottom lip, hard. "Call me when you have free time."

"I will," Beverly promised. "And please, Will, for your sake and mine...go home, okay? Go home, and don't make this your problem."

Will hung up, and he took his time putting his phone in his pocket and adjusting his shirt, fingers fidgeting and fumbling over things he knew shouldn't matter in the moment but suddenly did. Hannibal had said to call when he had the time to talk over the Avid Fan in detail, and it was only in remembering that that he stopped, hands finding their way into his pockets to stop their infernal need to move and touch and do.

He felt the need to call Hannibal. Something bad happened, call Hannibal. What had he said? 'You came to piece yourself back together with me.'? Knee-jerk was to tell Hannibal, and it was an ugly thing to have to realize that he wasn't as unflappable as he'd first felt, walking out of from that cage and into the real world. Barely out, and the moment he'd let Hannibal

have more than an iota of floor space, he'd taken an ice pick and skewered his brain to the fucking wall.

There was a second body on campus. There was a second body, and he was on a stupid date at a coffee shop. Reality was a crippling blow.

"Will, we can go if you need to."

He jumped at the sound of her voice, and the look on her face said that while she hadn't heard everything, she'd heard enough of something. She'd gathered their things, and even gotten Will a to-go cup for the rest of his London Fog. Her smile was kind in a way that made his teeth ache.

He thought to invite her to stay at the house with him, but the idea of the Chesapeake Ripper or his Avid Fan seeing her made their date end at the back of her car, by the bumper where a sticker urged the world to "coexist". He couldn't meet her gaze.

"I'm sorry," he said, quiet. "I'm not...good at talking about things like this. But I need to go."

Things like this being murder and all.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked, concerned. "I'm an open ear if you need...or even if you just want company."

The indecisive day cut her hair into strands of pale flaxen. She was an open ear, only he didn't like the idea of the ichor churning about in his brain; why pour it poisonously through her ear, too? He reached out and lightly put his fingers through hair as soft as dove's wing, and with an ease and calm he didn't entirely feel, he tucked it behind her ear.

"Thank you, Molly," he said, sincerely. "Thank you for just being you."

He took the initiative and kissed her first, and she wrapped her arms around him when he did.

The kind of company he needed wasn't the sort she could provide, though. It was an ironic thought that left him more than a little bitter as he trudged to his own car a block down and headed home, mouth buzzing from the kind of thing that made neurons snap and pop along his spine. If there was another body, there could be another note. Was there supposed to be? Would it be one from the Chesapeake Ripper, instead? Would the two of them arrive at the house around the same time and ultimately kill one another in the aftermath?

That would solve most of his problems, but he wouldn't bet on it.

His boss was more than understanding: *that* Will Graham.

His teachers were more than understanding: *that* Will Graham.

By the time he hit Wolf Trap, Will was pretty fucking tired of being that Will Graham.

The letter waiting on his doorstep solidified the whole damn thing.

My Dear Will Graham,

The news isn't reporting my letter as a calling card. Does this mean you intend to keep them private? A secret for the two of us?

I think often over Marissa Schurr, the one you mounted onto antlers once used by another for his trophies. Garrett Jacob Hobbs used every ounce of skin and bone, but you found it important that you only take some of her and leave the rest for them to find later, if only for the simple fact that you could.

When you take their life, do you see how we are nothing more than beings of change; quick sounds, flashes of light and color, changed only because you decided they should change? The space Garrett Jacob Hobbs inhabited may have housed his murders first, but you decided to change it with every body after. In the end, that cabin in the woods was yours, wasn't it? Finally taking the life that even Garrett Jacob Hobbs failed in taking?

I have long been an admirer of yours, and each newspaper clipping that I could find of you is saved. I commiserate with the slurs they slung at you in the newspaper: a Copycat first, a sympathetic psychopath second. The Wolf Trap Killer, the man-whose-mind-burned. You having endured this allows me to do as well, if only because you have born that same insult and rose above it all. Branded the Tooth Fairy; they will soon see what I am Becoming.

One day I will ask in person if you were the one to first suggest murder to Jared Freeman. If you whispered opportunity into his ear.

Until then, I remain your

-Avid Fan

He sat on his porch and pet Winston for awhile, mostly to catch his breath but also to thank the foundations of the house that the Tooth Fairy--Avid Fan, his mind whispered dangerously--hadn't ventured in and hurt his dog, all in the sake of violence.

God, if he'd hurt Winston...

Breath caught, heartbeat marginally slower than when he first found the letter on the doorstep, he gathered Winston up, and he got into the cab of the truck, and he went to see Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

A very, VERY Happy Holidays, and a FABULOUS New Year! 2020 is going to be great. It's got some of my favorite numbers, I'm going into a WHOLE new year of being completely out of retail, and I just got this wall calendar where I can try and set goals and be organized and what not...

We'll be going back to the regularly (see: "regularly") scheduled Friday chapter updates! Before holidays came out of left field, I'd actually been happy with that habit...I like a mild form of routine.

Thank you all for the love and support! It's been such a fantastic few years of writing, and I'm looking forward to another year of it. Have a lovely, lovely day, and as always...I hope you enjoyed. :)

Dramatic Irony

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9: Dramatic Irony

Hannibal Lecter's office was set in the far back of the private practice he worked at. The view let Will stare out over a pond whose gazebo housed a small therapy group. They were framed in a beautiful bay window, large swathes of forest green boxing them in. Gold cords dipped between the cloth, darts of sunlight reaching. Beside the gazebo, an intimate walkway lay protected by weeping willows whose branches sighed into the still water.

He'd tried to explain to the receptionist that he only needed a minute, not an appointment. But one thing led to another, and Winston was making himself at home beneath one of the chairs that sat across from one another despite Will's reservations, and his back was to the door because despite everything he'd said the other day to Beverly and Freddie Lounds, having a plan and exacting it are two completely separate things, no matter how much his brain tried to fold them like steel, to better temper it to a blade.

The door behind him opened, closed; Will turned away from the woman gesturing wildly in the middle of the gazebo that seemed in the middle of a nervous breakthrough.

"Good afternoon, Will," Hannibal said warmly. Sunlight made his eyes bleed gold.

"You kept our appointment time," he said bluntly to Hannibal, unsure of what else to say. He glanced to his eyes, then away, feigning interest in the decor. "The, uhm...the assistant at the counter said that you never have appointments at this time," he amended, lamely.

Hannibal's smile was small and pleased, and he took his time walking into the room and scenting the air. On one wall beside a modest bookshelf, rows of aesthetically placed certificates and degrees rested as sentinels of his success, and he paused by them to stop and pet Winston who'd trotted over at the opening.

Will was going to have to have a serious talk with that dog about reading people.

"I've never filled it," Hannibal replied simply. "I couldn't bring myself to."

Silence, save for the hollow drumming in Will's ears. He was here, only the taking of the one step into the next was somehow harder than it seemed before when hissing it into the space they'd made at the diner. He opened his mouth, closed it. Too late he realized that the chairs that sat across from one another in the middle of the office were the same exact ones from Hannibal's old duplex. He'd once sat in one and held a head embraced by firelight and viscera.

It was hard to picture Hannibal keeping something like that when everything else was obviously new, grand and opulent in the wake of all of his success. Will couldn't mistake that

leather though, curved and smooth. The memories he'd whispered into the folds of fabric surely couldn't fade with time, could they? His hand twitched, and he wanted to touch it.

Why keep them, if only to soak in the secrets of someone else? If one pressed their ear to the leather, would they hear the whispers?

"Did you bring your dog in case this became unpleasant?" Hannibal asked--Will recognized the dryness of the joke, the rasp of his voice when amused.

He swallowed thickly and shook his head, rubbing his eyes to try and scrub away the memories of how hard he'd gripped those armrests in his worst moments. "No...no, I just...didn't want to leave him home. It wasn't safe."

Hannibal tilted his head, but that was all Will would give.

"How close did he sit while you rested there under the blue?" Jared Freeman wondered for him, in case he forgot to. He circled the chairs, grabbed the back of one, and smiled invitingly at Will. *"Take a seat and spill your sorrows. Let the devil comfort you again."*

"Why a bat?" Will asked, looking away from the chairs.

Hannibal considered him, and he went to stand behind the chair closest to him. Jared stepped aside and made room graciously, bowing out of the way. Hannibal's hands rested on the back of it, elegant. "A bat is a perfectly reasonable home defense, Will."

Not for the guy that used drugs to intoxicate a man sitting in blissful unawareness as his hands were cut off. Will frowned and scratched at the answer in his mind, turning it over.

"Why do you think I used a bat?" Hannibal asked when Will didn't speak.

Will shrugged. "You don't have anything to prove to burglars."

"Perhaps not, but it's always likely that it's not a burglar," he agreed, and with care he crossed the short distance to Will, his steps silent on the rug. "You weren't a burglar," he reminded Will.

"'What would you have done if I came down the stairs,'" Will mused, and it made sense. The longer he'd sat on it, the more he was certain Hannibal had told Alana about that night in order to display the ease in which he could manipulate her. How she could be so easily turned against him like everyone else was. "It'd be weird if you accidentally grabbed Alana from behind and gutted her in your indignation," he said thoughtfully.

Just another reason why there wasn't a fourth person crammed into their booth in the back of the 24-Hour Diner. Alana Bloom, unfortunately, could not be trusted. Hannibal may have given her to Will as the only sound support while he was in prison, but it was with the understanding that that could change within a breath. Will had never quite forgotten that.

Freddie Lounds couldn't be trusted, either, but she could be used; that was good enough.

Will wanted to ask why Hannibal couldn't fill their standing appointment time. His jaw worked, trying to chew up the words to something less like real curiosity, but he couldn't.

"I...need to deal with you," Will said at last, and he looked to Hannibal standing a mere foot away, too close and yet not close enough. "My feelings for you," he reiterated, frowning.

"You've...changed," said Hannibal, watching him.

"You changed me," Will corrected. "You...got into my head, and you changed me."

"We are all products of the machinations of the world. The things that happen to us, the things we do; these all serve to mold us into new shapes."

"And oh how the busy bee did their best to mold me." With careful deliberation, he pulled out the newest letter from his Avid Fan, and he held it aloft in the brilliant sunlight cutting at the right angle through windowpanes. "You said that if you helped me find this Avid Fan of mine, I'd have to help you find the Chesapeake Ripper. Quid pro quo."

Hannibal's eyes tracked the letter, then flicked back to Will. "You've thought on my proposal?"

"The last time you said that you were going to help me, I was made to believe I killed a man," he said, and he held out the letter slowly. Uncertainty wasn't so much an act as it was easy to act on honest feelings. No matter what he felt he had to do, there was something to be said about willfully reaching to the devil's waiting hand. "That wasn't the Chesapeake Ripper. That was decidedly and irrevocably Hannibal Lecter."

"You told me that you killed that man," Hannibal said kindly.

"You told Abigail it was best I think that," Will replied, not quite so kind, "and after telling me that, she was never seen again."

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, and there was that flicker of something that he'd always had, that spark that made Will feel like his stare had pierced through to the back of his skull. Despite everything, he'd always felt marked in some way by Hannibal. Watched. Regarded. Wanted.

Hunted.

"Oh, no one told you that?" Will didn't smile so much as he bared his teeth. "No one told you that Abigail also accused you of being the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"Where she wasn't present to comment, it was considered hearsay." Hannibal didn't blink, his expression as still as his body.

"Hearsay," Will agreed, and he reached up to wipe the budding snarl from his lips. "Funny how she said it, then she was never seen again. I had a seizure, and when I woke up she was gone."

Hannibal dipped his head in polite acquiescence. Not so funny to Will, but maybe the Chesapeake Ripper found it *hilarious.*

"I think...it's best you and I stop pretending to be the people the rest of the world seems to think we are," Will suggested carefully. Quietly. He felt the precariousness of eggshells littering the floor, the tip-toe effect of treading into a minefield.

"And just how does the rest of the world seem to see us?" Hannibal asked. He took a step closer, and his fingers twitched. Close enough to kiss. Close enough to kill. Will wondered if Hannibal would snap up the letter before he could pull it away. Will wondered if he'd snap Will's neck instead for the trouble.

But no, no; he worked in a practice. Witnesses were about.

"Through a lens," he murmured. "Narrow scopes that can't see the bigger picture until it's too late. The way I see it...everything that's happened, everything that he's laid out...it's theater to him, I think." Him. The Chesapeake Ripper. Will frowned, propped his elbow and thumbed at his bottom lip. It felt wrong, somehow, speaking as though he wasn't in the room. Hannibal's eyes tracked his movements, tried to catch his gaze. "A grand design that so carefully he's laid...and we're all just playing parts to some end."

Hannibal's voice lowered to match his. The timbre of it reverberated in the bone arena of his skull. He was wanting, and Will could suddenly taste it in his voice. "You've broadened your sight, then, to the entire design?"

"Isn't that what I was supposed to discover in therapy?" Will returned, tilting his head up to better look into his eyes. His gaze skated along the cheekbone, the smooth dip from the grooved line of his smile to a long, regal nose. In earth tones and sunlight, his eyes were brilliant and crystal-sharp. The last eyes Abigail ever had to see. That close, his cologne filled Will's mouth with something warm and entirely inviting as he inhaled. In his worst nightmares, he craved the kiss they'd shared over Nicholas Boyle's body. He wondered which part of sex Alana enjoyed best.

"You never wanted me to find my best self when you offered to help me, after all," he said to Hannibal, soft and close and reminding. "You wanted me to find my true self. The good, as well as every sordid crevice in between."

"Maybe someone else would find what's up there pretty dang neat," a very dead Jared had suggested, once. In his dreams. In his nightmares.

For a moment, only the sound of Winston's collar disturbed the quiet of the room. Hannibal stared back, and falling into eyes like his were a dangerous thing because it was like sitting across from him in therapy again, only this time Will wasn't so foolish as to think he wasn't going to get eaten if he wasn't careful.

This time, Will was ready to bite back.

"Will Graham with a broad vision and scope, unafraid of his deadly capabilities; I think we'll find your killers yet," Hannibal replied at last. His head dipped lower, just slightly. If Will

leaned in, he could kiss him just like he had Molly earlier that day. He inhaled the taste of his secrets that clung like cobwebs to his lapels, and it coupled well with the spice of cinnamon and cedar wood.

Will deliberately broke the tension between them and walked around him in order to settle into a chair that shouldn't feel so familiar after four years if he hadn't spent the good part of a year trying to piece his mind back together in it. His palms tingled and pricked as they rested on the arms. There was once a time he'd gripped them and cried over remembering why it was important that Stammets plant connections in the earth.

If his abruptness caught Hannibal off guard, it didn't show. He walked past Will's chair, let his hand briefly touch his shoulder, then sat down across from him with one leg crossed and one hand outstretched. Offering. Will remembered when Hannibal had once lost his temper over touch privilege.

Before Will could let Freddie and Beverly's--arguably good--concerns roll over him, Will reached out and let Hannibal take the letter. "Then in that case, we have a deal."

Hannibal took his time reading the letter, and he took his time pondering it after. Will let him, absentmindedly petting Winston when he came over and sat by his leg. He let his eyes roam the shelves that housed some books he recognized and many he didn't. Clean and neatly arranged and organized as his degrees and certificates.

Will studied them longer than he wanted. He'd read over Hannibal's thesis like a starving beggar. The words were prolific, detached. Professors after commended him for his work and his sacrifice, and he'd all but been snapped up by the best practice in Baltimore after graduation. Intelligent, poised, driven; Dr. Hannibal Lecter was rumored to even be on lists for appearing at different universities in order to speak on the things he'd learned when befriending the murderous and rather ill Will Graham.

All this, of course, information provided by the esteemed Dr. Chilton.

"This is a shy boy, Will," Hannibal said at length, and by then his expression had smoothed to something studious and detached, his eyes filmed in thought. Will looked away from the gazebo where the group had dismissed. "Not unlike you, he has a distinct trouble with eyes and the demons inside."

"Do you think?"

"'Is that not what you do? Understand?'" he quoted, light. "The news reported mirrors over eyes that'd been removed."

Will nodded slowly, thinking to that moment in time when he'd had to step around large puddles of blood to stare into his own accusing yet terrified eyes. What had his Avid Fan seen, looking into them?

"The mirrors in the bathrooms were broken, too."

"And you've maybe met my eyes all of ten or twelve times in our entire time since your release," Hannibal said. "Worse after your walking into the room where the air held screams."

"How did no one hear her?" Will wondered, more to himself than Hannibal.

"There was a loud party going late in the courtyard beside them. The dorm hallways were left open, the speakers had been set against the outer wall of the dormitories...many of the students attending were going in and out. Her roommate was at the party during the attack. That is who found her after."

Will rubbed Winston's ear absentmindedly, and he stared at a spot just over Hannibal's shoulder.He wondered if Hannibal had locked the door behind him when he came in. "I think it'd be a student...anyone else would have been stuck out. They'd remember a teacher being at the party, or someone that didn't really go there."

"A student that's taken an admiration for your work," Hannibal murmured.

"Your work," Will snapped, looking at him.

He sighed. "I didn't--"

"No, see, you have something to hide, Hannibal, but I don't. I don't have a cover to keep, a facade to hide behind. You can pretend and simper and sigh your innocence all you want, but I know what you are, and I don't think I can pretend for the sake of your vanity."

"My vanity?" Hannibal's eyes brightened. Hardened.

"Whatever your game, I know what you are and what you're capable of. Helping you find the Chesapeake Ripper like he's a sock you've lost." Will scoffed, "you can pretend because you've still got something left to lose, but like I said, I'm done pretending."

Hannibal seemed to enjoy that. He smiled just slightly and looked down, brushing lint from his sleeve. "You think you have nothing left to lose?"

"Nothing I can't afford."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Will," he chided, "I think if I were the Chesapeake Ripper, there would be plenty of things I could do to show you just how much you still have left to lose."

Will's fingers in Winston's coat tightened instinctively.

Hannibal noticed, and that did nothing to comfort Will. Something in his look seemed to twist, though, as though he'd gotten a taste of something surprisingly bitter when he'd been expecting it to be sweet. He looked to Will, and his head tilted just slightly.

"Are you afraid, Will?"

"No."

"Then why do you look so afraid?"

Will swallowed. "I'm already worried this Avid Fan is going to kill my dog if they decide to walk in and Winston doesn't like them the way he seems to like you. Don't make me sweat on that about you, too."

"I don't harm animals," Hannibal reassured him, and he looked to Winston. "Does it bother you that he likes me?"

"Just goes to show you can't always trust a dog's instincts on people," said Will with a shrug. "I think...I think this guy would know her. He saw her, got close enough that him being around wouldn't be weird. Her friends would know if someone just started hanging around, but..."

"But that would require you asking them."

Will nodded. "Or asking Jack."

"An avenue I don't recommend," Hannibal agreed. "This person...they may be shy, but they intend on meeting you at some point."

"There's another body," Will said miserably. "I went home after hearing that and found this waiting...they have some knowledge of my schedule. If they followed and got close to those people, they'd do the same to me sooner or later."

"If they revealed themselves to you, what would you do, Will?" Hannibal asked, and there was that curiosity in his eyes, that spark like a mirror had been placed behind them. "Would you understand them, or would you kill them?"

"I'd probably tell them the truth and offer to introduce them to their real hero," Will replied honestly. "They mean to triumph over their idol, after all. I'd hate for them to be disappointed in only getting me."

-

Jack Crawford only called once, and the voicemail said it wasn't to ask for his help but instead to make sure that he was alright. Will listened to it only after he'd taken a walk of the property and cooled off, hands flexing. He still felt the oppressive air of Hannibal's intimate back office. He'd showered for a long time to try and be rid of it.

"Will, it's Jack. I'm not going to ask for your help, I won't do that anymore. I just want to make sure that you're alright. You're still a person of interest due to the active case of the Chesapeake Ripper, but I have to admit that there's nothing tying you to these murders, and I respect that. Just...hell, I'm worried about you. I know you've gone through hell and back, and now with these murders on the campus, I don't want you clamming up. Just let me know you're getting some kind of help, some kind of...support.

"Otherwise I might have to send a deputy out to do a wellness check," he warned, then ended the message.

Will pondered that as he threw the ball for Winston out in the field and sat in the eager sprouts of tall grass that'd risen with the rains. Wind buffed and teased the stalks and sent golden rods swaying in the sinking sun. Winston ran back, and he threw the ball high and hard, sending him leaping into the waves.

Could be that Jack meant it, and Will's attack had finally hit home. Could be a manipulation, to let his guard down.

Still, Will felt a little guilty at one thing: he had the evidence that tied those murders to him, only he didn't feel like giving them to Jack. Jack was letting go only because he had no reason to latch on; did Will want to give him the reason? Last time Will trusted Jack with his life, he ended up in prison. He didn't want to know what happened if Jack had the opportunity to wriggle back in and really set up shop.

Those girls, though...

He turned his conversation over with Hannibal, watching his house in the distance like a boat bobbing on the golden sea. Winston bounded back, and he threw the ball hard, towards the broader, open field. Now that Will wasn't pretending, it was staggering to see how much Hannibal also didn't seem to pretend; how easy it was to be cruel and bare his fangs, knowing they would still catch Will off guard to see them in the daylight. How easy it'd been to open up, to once again release the flood of thoughts that'd sat silent and suspended within his mind...

"You missed him," Jared sneered, accusing. He stood behind Will rather than relax. *"You missed your conversations."*

"Yeah, but he missed me too," Will replied, reaching up to wipe the smile off of his mouth.

The sun dipped beneath the trees, and he stood in the sea of growth, of seeds sprouting and reaching for the sky. Winston came running back, and at least he could trust that Hannibal wasn't going to try and kill his dog.

Sometimes, it was the little things.

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The next morning, the letter was waiting on Will's breakfast table, and Will scowled down at it as he waited for the coffee to brew, sleep a thing that'd danced in and out from his running thoughts. *Jael and Sisera*. Abigail's last words to him. Hannibal's cruel and devilish smile. Winston nosed at his calf, and he jolted at the coldness of it.

Armed with his cup of coffee and a sour expression, he hefted the weighted cream paper and popped the ridiculous wax seal on the back.

My Dear Will Graham,

Molly Foster is beautiful. I can see why you are trying so hard to be like her.

Yours,

-*Chesapeake Ripper*

Shock is a funny thing. Most people think of it always as a cold, jarring thing that makes a person leap to action, but sometimes shock is a creeping thing that takes time to truly register, and that was what this blend of shock was. As Will held the letter and read and reread it, he set his coffee cup down slowly and continued to reread it, swallowing becoming difficult as the shock crept. The words were read, but they didn't quite catch, didn't quite hit home.

Winston whined at his side, and Will dropped the letter, pawing for his phone as he continued to gulp, breath beginning to be difficult to pull to lungs freezing up at the shock. When it hit, it was a wave of it all at once, and his fingers were fat and useless as he tried to move them to action.

He'd been so concerned over Winston in that office that he'd completely forgotten about Molly.

Molly.

"You've reached the voicemail of Molly Foster. I'm sorry that I can't take your call at the moment, but if you leave your name and the reason for your call I will return it as soon as possible. Thank you!"

"Molly, where are you? I...uh, I'm sorry, it's Will, I just...need to make sure that you're alright? If you could meet me at the Starbucks near the shop, I need to...to talk to you, please. I hope...uhm, I hope you're okay. Please let me know if you're okay."

When Jack Crawford arrived at his house with two SUV's, in tow and lights silently flashing on each one, the cold and shock had finally settled deep enough that he knew without quite having to know that Molly Foster was not doing alright.

Sometimes, the little things didn't matter for squat.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of the continued support and excitement for this fic! I'm currently sweltering under the "grey season" of the PNW, and I can't wait to finally see some sun! I hope your 2020 New Year is going splendidly!

*If you haven't received a reply to your comment, I will be going through my inbox today! :) Thank you all for the kind words, support, theories, and analysis. I really do appreciate your feedback and kindness.

Act I: Scene

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10: Act I: Scene

Dear Molly Foster,

I have not had the pleasure of meeting you. Should Will Graham will it, we will never have the pleasure. He can be greedy about the things he cares about, and for good reason. It seems that the things he tends to care about are the things in his life that tend to die.

When you met him, was it his empathy or his mystery that intrigued you? Was it his kindness or how he studiously pretends that he doesn't have it in him to be kind? I wish I could have been there to also witness it. It is a rare thing when he can bring himself to let the things that he loves come inside and stay awhile. You must have truly caught him off guard.

For me, it is his duality. You should ask him if he hates me for what I've done. Watch the range of expressions on his face and tell me if you can find one that speaks as wholly and completely honest. The one that triumphs over all other feelings.

I'd love to know what it is you see.

Tell him hello for me,

-Chesapeake Ripper

Will wasn't allowed to touch it, but he was allowed to read it. Sitting beside Molly Foster in a much warmer interrogation room than the sort he normally frequented, his skin was far colder than he'd have liked. His heart had taken on an oddly trembling staccato.

He wanted to think that Jack didn't want them there any more than Will wanted them to be there. Things had been oddly quiet, tense in the car--not in the way Will had cultivated so persistently, but in a way that said that even this was something Jack couldn't fathom, couldn't quite wrap his head around.

"I mean, it's like I said, Agent Crawford...this was sitting on my apartment table when I woke up this morning." Her arms wrapped tight around her body squeezed, then relaxed. "I didn't...I didn't hear anything in the middle of the night. I didn't realize..."

Jack looked somehow older than he did the day of Kayla Idlett's death. Of course, though; his Magnum Opus was taunting them, and he didn't have the means of combating it. "That's not your fault, ma'am. This is a dangerous man, and you in no way could have anticipated what he was going to do."

Molly didn't respond to that, and Will could hazard a guess why. He'd warned her, hadn't he? That knowing him was deadly? *Mine could endanger your life*, he'd said. The letter Will had

pressed to Jack's hands the moment he'd reached him on the steps of his house--surrendered so much more easily than his Avid Fan's--said more than pages could.

Will had told Hannibal Lecter that he had nothing left to lose. The Chesapeake Ripper was reminding him of just how wrong he was.

I think it's best you and I stop pretending to be the people the rest of the world seems to think we are.

"What do you think, Jack?" Will asked. His chin was propped by his fist, his eyes fixed to the small blemish of a scuff on the table. He wanted to comfort Molly, maybe an arm around her shoulder, but the words the Ripper had left her seared and made his palms hot from the wound of it. He couldn't imagine Molly wanting his touch. He couldn't imagine putting hands to her that'd once held out letters in offering to the Chesapeake Ripper.

He needed a shower after this. A good, long shower.

"There's considerable reason to suggest that he means you harm, Miss Foster," Jack said, looking at Molly. "Your safety is paramount while we continue this investigation, but we cannot force you. We can place agents at your residence, we can relocate you to a safe location, or you can continue as normal with agents posted outside of your residence and place of work."

"As normal?" Will snapped, and he had to bite down on his thumb to soften the sound of his anger. After a beat, "The Chesapeake Ripper is threatening her," he tried again, much more nicely.

"He's made no threat, only contact," Jack replied. "Unfortunately, that means that she has options whether you agree to them or not, Mr. Graham."

"I...I don't know. Do I have time to decide that?" Molly asked. "Without sitting in a room that makes me feel like I did something wrong?"

"You do," Jack reassured her.

They sat out underneath the Japanese Maples whose red leaves contrasted sharply against the green and hopeful golden of other hardwoods. The courtyard sat on the inside of the FBI rather than out and where Jack likely feared Will would abscond with her. There was space between them on the wrought-iron bench, although that was Will more so than Molly. He felt as though he'd dirtied something between them with his stupidity, with his anger. With his pushing the Chesapeake Ripper.

She didn't know that part, though, how he'd let himself bare teeth to someone that delighted in ripping them out. She only saw the parts of him he showed her. The sad parts and the longing.

Beverly had warned him, hadn't she? Jealousy's a wildfire?

"When you meant that you were running from someone, was this who you meant?" Molly asked. She wasn't accusatory. The fear from before had calmed to something more like conversation. Maybe it was from being out from under Jack Crawford's stare. The bastard had that affect on people.

"...Yeah."

"I kind of thought you were a little crazy, saying that," she admitted.

"You aren't the first," he assured her. "He loves making people think I'm crazy."

"He's the one that's done all this to you, isn't he?" she asked, and she surprised Will when she reached out and grabbed his hand from his lap, holding it tight in the space between them. "Everything I read...he did all of that to you."

Will looked at their hands, and he squeezed back tightly. "He did."

He couldn't bring himself to look at her face. If he looked, he saw, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to see. In reality, a normal person would run. A normal person would run, and they'd never look back because in all of her reading, surely Molly saw that no one survived when they stayed too long beside Will? Anyone that honestly cared about him seemed to die?

She let go, and he didn't have time to register it before she was pulling him into a hug tight enough to bruise. Her strength surprised him only long enough for him to fold beneath it, his grip equally needing as he laid his head on her shoulder and shuddered, once. Against his nose, her neck smelled of cherry blossoms, things budding and beautiful. "Oh, Will..." she sighed, soft. "How long have you had to go through this alone?"

He closed his eyes, and birds called out for him among the growth of the branches above, the promise of something more. Hannibal's smile in the sunlight combated it, reminded him of just how close he could get when Will wasn't looking. He swallowed heavily and caught his breath against her skin, silent gulps because he'd be damned if anyone ever again saw him cry.

"I can't let you endanger yourself, Molly," he said, and he held onto her tightly, afraid to let go. "I don't know if you fully understand just what it means if he really wants you to come to harm. If he wants you dead, you will die. I...I can't promise you'll be safe, and I couldn't handle it if he hurt you."

She gave that the consideration it was owed, and they were quiet for a time. She kept an arm wrapped tight around him, and he laid his head across her shoulder. Occasionally, she would reach up to run fingers through his curls, and he hated just how calming it was. If Hannibal surely saw them now, wouldn't he kill her on principle alone? In his indignation at Will's comfort?

"You aren't dead," she said at length, passing fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes, opened them to stare at the red leaves uncurling like hesitant, childish hands to the sky.

"He doesn't want me dead yet."

"What does that mean," she wondered, soft.

"It's a game to him, Molly, it's...he loves this. Toying with people, making them guess. He loves to see what people will do. Action and reaction. He...anticipates your reaction to all of this."

"What did he write in that letter to you? Agent Crawford wouldn't let me see it. He said that you had to consent to it."

Will didn't want to tell her. He chewed on his lip furiously, stared at the leaves and gave only under the weight of her patience. "He said that you were beautiful...that...that he could see why I liked you."

I can see why you're trying so hard to be like her.

He would give Jack Crawford one single, solitary consideration: he didn't let Molly see Will like that. Maybe some part of the bastard felt a level of decency.

"Liar," Jared taunted. "Already lying to keep her safe from you."

"Creepy," Molly murmured. "No wonder you looked like that when you saw me."

"How'd I look?"

"...Relieved. Like you didn't expect me to be alive."

He hadn't, realistically. Despite Jack's reassurance, he'd expected to be tricked into walking into the sub-levels of the FBI where the bodies were, where surely the Chesapeake Ripper would ensure the likes of Molly Foster would end up because how dare Will allow anyone else to potentially change him? How dare he allow the possibility?

"I can't stop you," he confessed. "No matter what you choose, it's your choice. I just...I don't want you to endanger yourself because of any romantic notions. He...he really will kill you, Molly. He'll kill you, and he'll probably take your organs, and he'll eat them because he thinks of people much like we think of the meat we buy at the store."

She was quiet, fingers passing gently through his tangled hair.

"He does that," Will whispered, and he shuddered. "People don't like to think that happens in real life because real life is so civil, so...structured. He loves that people can't see beyond the structure of society, of what they perceive to be reality. Everyone just...expects the world and its things to fall a certain way, and meanwhile he takes that expectation and throws it onto the blunt and aged horns of a stuffed stag's head just because he can.

"You read the articles about me, and you still wanted to..to be around me. I don't know really what that means; you pity me, or you want to bring me comfort, or you think it's mysterious, I don't....I don't know. But what I do know is that when I was sick, that monster took one of the few mentors in my life and strapped them to a chair in order to drug them against their will. He chopped off their hands, he removed their eyes, and he sat and listened to their

screaming when they died. When I had a seizure at the scene, my reaction was used as evidence to my guilt."

Will licked his lips, dry and chapped as they were. He needed to stop biting at them. "The Chesapeake Ripper thought it was fucking hilarious."

"Are you trying to scare me?" she asked off-handedly. Her voice betrayed the success of it, trying or not.

"No, I'm trying to explain just what you are potentially risking if you persist under the supposition that he will spare you because of 'reasons'," Will replied quietly. His eyes burned. "If it's scaring you, it should."

"So you'd just let him...take anything away that made you happy?"

"I'm saying I'd rather him take you away without you dying in the process," Will replied, and he sat up, allowing the space between them to grow once more. It ached, but he knew better--he'd known better. "You walking away now, going into a safehouse or something is the best kind of loss. Better than me waking up to a crime scene where you are the subject of his everlasting art. I don't think I could ever live with myself if that happened to you. He'd devour you and leave me to pick up the pieces."

"Does he always take what you care about the most?" she asked, and despite his pulling away she still reached out to take his hand. Persistent, needing. She was resiliently kind.

"He takes the thing I need the most," said Will.

"Why?"

Will frowned, and he had the wild urge to rip the budding leaves off of the maple's branches dancing just before them. "Because he wants to see what I do to survive it."

She turned to take his face in her palms, her expression understanding in a sad sort of way. She was sharp, clever, so quick to his defense rather than her safety. Her lips pursed as she studied his angles, his bleakness and his fears. Her thumbs brushed his cheeks. "Do you hate him for what he's done, Will?" she asked, gentle.

He wasn't sure what it was that Molly saw in his face. He thought of the letter, how it'd teased her with just enough of what Hannibal knew she'd want to see. What emotions? What empathy? What monstrosity? Surely she'd want to know just what it was that made the Chesapeake Ripper find him so interesting?

"What do you think?" he asked. It was his way of asking what she saw.

"I'm sorry, Will," she said after a moment. It was gentle and a very telling answer. She leaned in to kiss him on the forehead, and it felt she was wishing him well as much as she was bidding him goodbye.

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The third design of the Chesapeake Ripper was found at Wilson's Auto Body. Will was let go via voicemail, and he listened to it while standing on the bleak and uninspiring steps outside of his photography class. The second victim on campus was a widow by the name of Paula Timmonds. It seemed that even professors weren't safe, and Will had had the misfortune of seeing his face plastered on more than one campus poster asking for his cooperation with the police in finding these victims.

Maybe that was why Beverly had advised him not to go to school. Not all of the signs had been taken down.

It was week later before the Chesapeake Ripper had struck a killing blow, and it hadn't been Molly; thank God it hadn't been Molly. He thought to call his father, maybe warn him, but he wasn't sure if Bill would find it insulting or if it'd make him more persistent to reach out.

And if the Chesapeake Ripper saw that, would he *then* decide to kill his father after all?

There was something coiling around in Will's intestines that smarted of guilt that he felt more relief that this random coworker of his had died rather than Molly. Just what did that say about him, that he found himself analyzing Hannibal's motive in his mercy rather than just what he'd done to the poor bastard?

"The Chesapeake Ripper has killed again," Dolarhyde said beside him on the steps, looking up at the sky. Class was dismissed, and his camera bag was slung over his shoulder. "Right after Professor Timmonds was murdered."

"He did," Will agreed dismally. Molly had accepted FBI presence in her home. She hadn't made it entirely clear on what that meant for Will.

"I wonder what the mechanic did."

"Knew me," Will replied, deleting the voicemail. "Well, worked near me," he amended caustically. He wondered what Professor Timmonds and Kayla Idlett had done for the Tooth Fairy to bite.

"Can't be good for tips."

"Can't be good for keeping jobs," Will retorted. It wasn't really his style, snapping at other students, and he reached up to wipe the snarl from his lips. Not like he needed the money; he just needed to stay busy. Maybe it was best he went home. "I'm sorry, I'm not...really the best company right now," he said, glancing to his table-mate. Wouldn't do well to piss off the only person apparently brave enough to go in on group projects with him.

"Me neither," he replied readily. "You're the only one that'll...take the chair by me."

Will smiled grimly, looking away from him. "You're not my problem."

"Maybe I'll be a...a help instead," he said, and Will looked up in time to catch him covering the cleft at his lip, as well as the snarl at his lisp. "...Want to grab a drink?"

And despite the fact his own father had shown him the myriad of ways in which a drink could always make a dire situation worse, Will found himself nodding. Noon wasn't too early to drink, was it? Making friends was somewhere on a "new life" agenda, wasn't it?

Not if Hannibal had his fucking way.

"There's a bar just down the road," Will said, and with that they headed off with purpose.

Francis Dolarhyde wasn't a prying man, and they sat at a run down bar just down the road from campus, close enough to an exit that Will didn't feel trapped. Even walking into the establishment, his tablemate was easily the largest guy in the bar, and even a few bikers in leather towards the back didn't try and puff up when he drew near.

He took his beer dark, and they sat near a window. Will couldn't quite get the image of PBR out of his father's hand, so he ordered a Jack & Coke instead and nursed it alongside some salted peanuts in a bowl.

He thought to make a quip about this being his 21-run, but it felt like a lame attempt at a joke of something much like referencing his past. He grimaced at the drink. He was about as good at this as he was at dating. It tasted like a coke gone sour in a sewer in the dead of July, but he drank it anyway.

"You didn't have to, you know," he said, glancing from the peanuts to Dolarhyde. "I'll still sit next to you in class regardless of a drink."

"I don't do things based on 'have to' or 'don't have to'," said Dolarhyde.

Will believed him. "Then...thanks."

He nodded towards the drink. "You a liquor man?"

"I don't know what I am," said Will honestly. "I think I'm just really trying to figure that out."

He laughed at that, a small huff of a sound, and he looked out of the window, shaking his head. "I don't believe that," he said slowly. "You got...mmm, a kinda purpose to you. Like you know where you're goin' and what you're trying to do."

"Doesn't mean I know if I like liquor over beer or wine."

"Didn't grab from daddy's cabinet?"

"He was a PBR man, and I'll never drink it," Will vowed.

Dolarhyde nodded in agreement and took a slow, easy sip. His eyes flicked over the things that wandered and passed the time outside. Not an eye contact guy. "Teacher once told me never drink a beer lighter than the table you're drinkin' at...I agreed. I like the darker beer anyhow."

Will nodded, although he couldn't have said which smelled worse: the beer or the sugary-soaked liquor.

"You worried about a job now?"

"Shouldn't be. I got compensated for my false confinement." Now that it was obvious, words came a little easier. Dolarhyde didn't seem to judge Will for it the way others did. The way he'd so easily sat down next to Will after Kayla Idlett's murder, as though it had nothing to do with him.

Will thought of the signs posted, begging him to come forward and help. He swallowed down the taste of Jack and the last time he'd helped in a case. He wondered how tickled Hannibal was he'd rather accept *his* help over Jack's.

Dolarhyde nodded in understanding, looking back to him. "They owed you for what they did."

"Yeah, but I also like to stay busy...I'll start applying again tomorrow."

"Idle hands and workth-shopss...and all, right?" Dolarhyde's hand jerked, just slightly. He shifted after a moment and propped his chin in his hand so that his fingers could casually cover his mouth.

"Right," Will agreed easily, not drawing attention to it. He often felt uncomfortable in his own skin, too. "Keeps my mind sharp, keeps my hands moving. Maybe I won't if school starts up in the summer for me."

"You did a lot of reading in prison?"

Will nodded.

"What kind?"

"All sorts. Some law, some psychology, some history. Poetry when I could. Anything I could get my hands on."

"Poetry?"

Will nodded again.

"You're an...intelligent guy," he said, and he lifted his glass in solidarity and took a drink of it. "Lotta people waste their life, even that that never been in jail."

"I guess it just depends on if you want to be the dragon, or if you want to be the woman clothed in sun," Will recalled, thinking back to the painting on the first day of class.

Dolarhyde gave him a look, then, and Will couldn't have said quite what it was. It was enough that Will met his eyes, enough to see something much like puzzlement. Maybe something darker, something...primal.

"Oh?"

"Well, the woman clothed in the sun is beautiful and divine, but she's devoured in the end," said Will, shrugging. "To be a Great, Red Dragon...that is something no one can defeat."

Dolarhyde tilted his head slowly, like he wasn't quite sure what it was he was seeing. "You read in prison so that you could become the dragon rather than the woman?"

"Read, studied...whatever they'd let me do. Better to be Jael than Sisera, right?"

"Yeah," he agreed.

Dolarhyde had a steady sincerity, and it lingered long after they'd parted ways. Will wondered about the look in his eyes, as though there was an endless pit to fall into, something where a dragon was waiting at the bottom.

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A car in his driveway in the early morning left Will warily stamping the cold out of his feet as he zipped his jacket up and waited. He'd avoided the news out of a stubborn need not to see the Chesapeake Ripper's latest tableau through the eyes of those that would generalize and make a muck of it. The news lied, mostly. Stories sold, not the truth.

In reality, the older Will got the more he seemed to realize just how little adults loved the truth.

Professor Timmonds' funeral was speculated to be so well-attended it may be held in the auditorium of the school. Of course, no one knew quite when it would be, as her body was currently at the FBI being studied and dissected from every angle. Will tried not to linger on the way the news slurred and spit the Tooth Fairy's name. The more he heard it, the more convinced he was the bastard wouldn't like it.

Surely the angrier his Avid Fan became, the more gruesome his monstrosities?

Out of anyone stepping out of the car, the last person Will suspected was Peter Bernardone, who'd mentioned on more than one occasion that he really shouldn't be behind the wheel of a car if he could help it. Stress could affect his motor skills, he'd mentioned once.

It was difficult to start with that, however, at the sight of Peter shuffling towards him, head down and turned, arms and torso rusted with the familiar tang of what Will unfortunately come to know all too well as blood.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are! So sorry to drop a twist like that at the end of a chapter, but I tend to do that a lot and I'm not sure if that's stopping any time soon. :)

Thank you all for the lovely notes and comments and kudos! I'm so glad that we're going on this ride together. Have a fantastic day, and as always...I hope you enjoyed.

End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr as Elfnerdherder! Come say hello!

A special thanks to my patrons: Sylarana, Duhaunt6, Mendacious Bean, Superlurk, Cecily, Evertonem, Inky-Starlight, Heather Feather, Laura G., and Dancy_85!

I see this as a bitter Will Graham with a bone to pick, and a Hannibal that's willing to pick at bones, too. I will update tags as necessary.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!